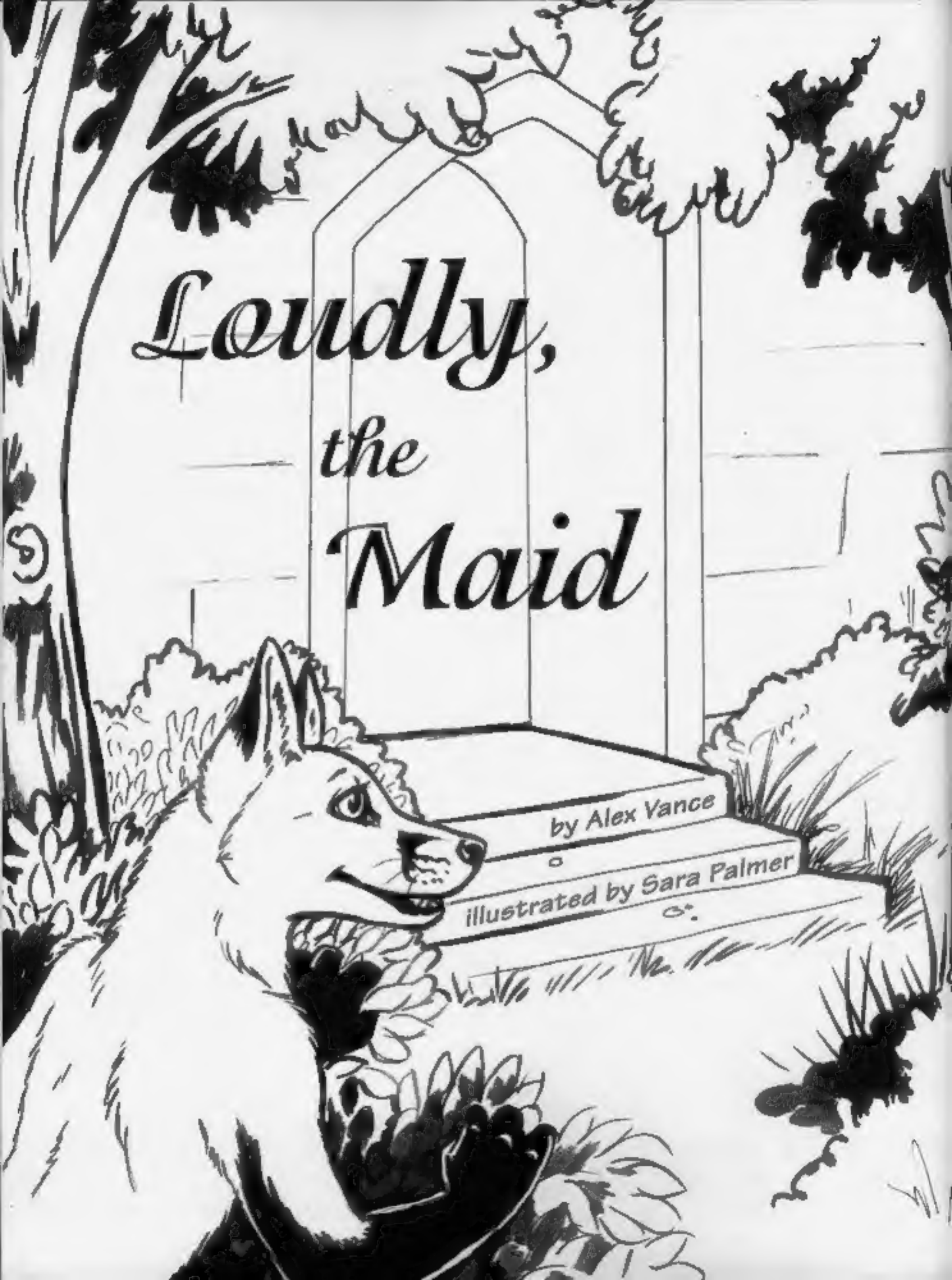


COME FOR THE SUN.
BUT STAY FOR THE

FOUR

07





Loudly, the Maid

by Alex Vance

illustrated by Sara Palmer

Young nobles in gaudy clothes and sparkling jewelry sat on low marble benches here and there, the ladies with their useless parasols, and the gentlemen in suits of silk and velvet that clung close to their bodies if they were of pleasing shape and discretely loose if they were not.



A pair of wolves, males both, staggered out of the dining hall's doors with their arms around each other for support and a

bottle in each of their hands.

Sark '07

Loudly the fox was still as a mouse. He crouched in hedges made blue by a moon that flirted with the clouds all too flickly for Loudly's tastes. The promise of convenient shadows cast over the courtyard he meant to cross was hollow, and the moon's blue light was interrupted all too infrequently and far too briefly for the fox to cross. He bit his lip and ignored the thistles that stung him and would no doubt cost him hours if not days to clean out of his pelt and gazed jealously over the courtyard.

Young nobles in gaudy clothes and sparkling jewelry sat on low marble benches here and there, the ladies with their useless parasols, and the gentlemen in suits of silk and velvet that clung close to their bodies if they were of pleasing shape and discretely loose if they were not. The light from the dining-hall, from whose open doors these nobles occasionally spilled along with the warmth and music they no doubt sought to escape, stretched no further than the fountain at the courtyard's centre, and the lanterns hung on trees' branches here and there illuminated no more than a foot around. Loudly could easily dart across, unseen and unheard, even if he passed a scant foot from any of these expensively coiffed and tailored dopes—if he could only have some darkness.

Loudly whined despite himself and quickly bit his thin, black lip as his eye was drawn by a pair of wolves, males both, staggering out of the dining hall's doors with their arms around each other for support and a bottle in each of their hands that explained why they needed supporting. Their talk was loud and full of rough barks and whoops and laughter, their walk unsteady and serpentine, taken in fresh directions by one of the pair stumbling over such obstacles as flagstones set at the exact same height as all the others, lanterns hung high enough that they could easily pass underneath, and the occasional abandonment of their mutually linked arms to make some manner of rude gesture.

Loudly smiled, and licked his lips. He was a good judge of character and of situation at the worst of times, and here was a scene which unfolded in his mind before he saw it before his eyes. The two young wolves, one slender in golden silk with thick lace at his wrists, his companion, broader of shoulder with a suit of dark

red velvet made darker at the front by a stain of spilled wine, would stagger until they could stagger no more and come to rest beneath one of the trees on the broad path that led from the courtyard to the garden proper. In that tree's shade their voices would dim and the passion for good living they'd carried with them from the dining hall would fade slowly, taking with it their thoughts of women and sport and conquest of any kind.

Left vulnerable and honest by the drink and the cool air, the blue light and the smell of trees and grass that was strong enough to make them forget there was such a thing as a mansion or a dinner party, they would gaze at each other for fragile moments and unless the Black Jester himself appeared from his wicked realm to shake his wicked rattle at the pair and spoil their fate, the young wolves would touch muzzles and lips, link tongues and teeth and would be lost in the thick shadows of the straight tree-trunks so densely planted along the pathway, in a scattering of clothes and an hour of untroubled pleasure.

Blinking, the scene vanished from Loudly's mind. The two wolves had indeed tired of their aimless trek toward the mansion's garden and leaned, together, against one of the trees. They breathed heavily, crisp air quickly driving the warmth of wine and laughter from their veins and taking with it the casualness and the naturalness of their touching, which they'd taken for granted moments before. The looks, though Loudly from his perch amid the hedges, leaning to the side to see the wolves better, and now the touches, and the nearing of lips...

They were uncommonly handsome, these two. Not uncommon for males in general, but for males of their standing they had a bearing and a musculature that spoke of an active lifestyle of which their parents no doubt disapproved. But not Loudly. If he were to be stuck in these stinging, itching bushes all night because the Moon—the slut!—refused to pick a beau to dally with from the clouds that swirled past her, then the sight of two such fine young nobles coupling in her light would at least comfort him.

Just as the wolves kissed (and much to Loudly's surprise it was the slender one in gold who

pressed his lips forward first), the sight of them was snatched from him. A sharp wind blew out the candles in some of the colourful paper lanterns and a ripple of theatrical feminine gasps and gullible male laughs of reassurance passed through such nobles as had gathered in the courtyard, many of them returning to the light and music of the dining hall. Loudly was so lost in his frustration at the privacy the two males had been granted that it took him a few moments to realise that the courtyard was still dark.

Glancing up, ignoring a wolfish groan of delight from down the path, he looked up to see that the Moon had chosen her suitor, a burly cloud that enveloped her and a good step up from the wisps and puffs that had vied for her attention earlier. Leaving both couples to their business, Loudly made his move.

Later, one lord who had fallen over in a drunken daze at the rim of the courtyard, a mouse so portly and dressed in such greys that he was easily mistaken for one of the benches, would claim to have seen a naked red fox run from the hedges, through the fountain, and use his belly as a stepping-stone before launching himself up against the mansion wall and disappearing into a half-open window like a sheet of red silk being drawn swiftly and silently through a keyhole. He would go on to claim that this was a sign of extremely good wine and encourage the party's host to invest in a few more barrels for next year's fête.



A sense of accomplishment leant a cocky slant to Loudly's ears that easily overpowered their desire to fold with shame or fear of discovery as the svelte fox padded silently down the black and white marble-tiled corridor, staying far enough away from the tall windows that no one from the courtyard below would see the faintest hint of his red pelt, his white chest, or his black ears. He tried every door he passed, but each was locked.

All he now needed was one unlocked door and a linen closet in the room beyond with as little as a nightshirt or a robe, or, if those were too much to ask for, a soft sheet from which he might plausibly fashion a toga. Loudly snorted

as he tried the last door before the corridor split, and wondered if perhaps he'd already spent all his wishes for tonight by asking for darkness in the courtyard. He surveyed his options, reaching the crossing. Turn right, to a corridor much like that which he'd just left (guest chambers on one side and windows on the other) or left, deeper into the mansion and into areas he was unfamiliar with.

He rubbed one footpaw behind his calf and swished his fluffy tail against the back of his legs, which allowed his vulpine nature to break through the quagmire of his ponderings and, naturally, Loudly followed the road he didn't yet know. He had scarcely taken three steps when the solid and frightfully cold marble under his footpads became liquid and caused his foot to slip at such speed that his leg flew up dramatically. The fox spun in the air just long enough to make for a very hard landing when his flexible, soft-furred body smacked against the unyielding marble floor.

Loudly made not a sound, which was something he was good at and which had earned him his name. At least I don't feel the cold now, he thought as he sat up, his limbs clamouring for attention like merchants shouting their grievances to the Adjudicator at the market.

Stifling a groan, Loudly carefully got to his feet, distrusting the floor that had suddenly become so slippery, when he realised it wasn't the floor itself that had sent him flailing, but rather a small, thin piece of cloth which when he plucked it from the ground and held under the light of one of the oil lamps adorning the wall, was revealed to be nothing more than a sock.

Instantly, Loudly's ears shot up and he clutched the thin garment to his chest more gratefully than he would have a bar of gold or a Royal pardon for his crimes (which, if anyone alive knew they had all been committed by the same fox, would together amount to several life sentences, and several death ones as well). As it was, he pulled the sock onto his foot, hopping excitedly, enjoying the feel of the strangely elastic black fabric around his footpaw and calf as he looked around for its twin.

The corridors from here formed a warren, with intersections every twenty or thirty steps that

meant the rooms they led to couldn't be very large, but also served to make the mansion entire seem larger. Consequently there were many directions for Loudly to scamper to, his gait made irregular by one slippery, but at least warmly-clad foot before he found another garment. Not a sock, as he'd hoped, but a glove. Regardless, the cold that had crept through his limbs as he'd hidden in the hedge was now gnawing painfully at his bones, so Loudly tugged the white glove onto his paw, wondering curiously at the tightness of the cut and the fact that it reached nigh to his elbow.

Before he could think why such garments would be littered about the upper floor of as fine and large a mansion as this, he spotted the glimmer of black silk on a black tile a little down another corridor and snatched it up eagerly, clothing his other foot, and shortly thereafter finding a match for the glove he wore. Loudly chuckled inwardly at the thought of being seen now—what a sight! A fox in socks and gloves and nothing else, his sheath clinging to his taut white belly, the pouch below swinging between his thighs for all to see.

His steps caught speed, now, the soft scent from these clothes strong enough to lead him on. A silk shirt, as black as his high socks, lay in a crumpled heap in the middle of one intersection, one of its short sleeves outstretched in one direction. As Loudly pulled the shirt on, carefully wiggling his way in so as not to tear the seams of the tight garment, he headed down the direction indicated.

He was just buttoning the shirt up, confused at how tight it was around the abdomen and how loose around the chest, when he spotted a larger cloth of white, with lace frills at the hems. By the time he'd picked it up and realised it was an apron he was not surprised to find, just around the corner appeared a rather short black skirt; nor was he surprised to hear, from a few intersections away, the snoring of a female. Loudly's mind, so adept at unfolding situations from small clues, had no sooner pieced together the events that had led to this scattering of clothes than he heard a voice some few corridors away.

"My dear?" was the sharp, whispered call, sounding quite plainly frustrated as though

it had been repeated very often, to very little success.

Loudly wasted no time. He pulled the skirt on over his legs and tried to get the waist to settle around his hips, having a little experience with such garments, the source of which he was not inclined to think about. The donning of the skirt was for practicality, for warmth while running, and Loudly was just tossing the apron aside and getting ready to turn his walk away from the whispered voice into a run when he bumped into a hard chest, attached to a rather large and uniformed wolf.

The corridors with their many turns had played tricks on Loudly's ears, which pinned back as he gazed up at the wolf. The lupine muzzle and eyebrows showed the grey of age, while the shoulders that filled the jacket of his blue uniform hinted that this male had many healthy years ahead of him. Being partial to all things sparkly, Loudly immediately noted the golden epaulets on the uniform's shoulders, the half-dozen small medals pinned on the blue jacket's left breast, the ceremonial dagger sheathed at his hip, the steel belt buckle and the earring that, together, identified this wolf as a Navy man, perhaps a Lieutenant or a Master of Arms. The absence of his cap, the gleaming white-toothed grin and the rather evident bulge beneath the wolf's belt buckle indicated that duty was now far from his mind.

"There you are, my pretty vixen," the wolf said in a whisper, and Loudly, who cursed his mind for thinking so many thoughts at once and leaving no time to consider this present situation, could only nod. Deeper and deeper the fox felt himself slide into trouble, as with every passing moment he was losing opportunities which his shock-slowed brain was only inventing a moment later. The wolf's hands were on Loudly's hips, thumbs teasing under the hem of his short black shirt, and as he stepped back toward the wall, so did the wolf step forward. His breath carried the scent of port and the heat of lust; his manner displayed the lupine's inebriation and need with equal honesty. "You've led me a merry chase."

Loudly swallowed, knitted his eyebrows, slackened his features and gave the tall, grinning wolf a smile and a sultry look. "Not as merry as

your reward, sir sailor," he said in the highest tone of voice he could manage without sounding comical, and stood up on the tips of his socked toes to press his nose to the wolf's, and flick his tongue over the other male's lips.

The hands that had merely groped Loudly's slim hips now gripped them firmly and lifted, bringing the fox' footpaws off the ground so that the wolf could devour his snout in a deep, hard kiss. "Oh, you sweet thing," the wolf said between hard, rough kisses, suckling at Loudly's teeth and tongue as if he'd never tasted better. "You've a reward for me? Truly I'm blessed. May I have...kisses, then?" the wolf asked with a deep rumble, slowly setting Loudly back on his footpaws. The fox didn't even need to look into the wolf's eyes to know that it wasn't kisses on the lips the sailor wanted.

There was something about the maid's uniform he wore that made Loudly's motions somehow more feminine and more lovely, and as he descended to his knees, brushing the creases out of his skirt—the skirt, he quickly corrected himself—while nuzzling at the buttons of the sailor's jacket, he wondered if perhaps females possessed their grace by virtue of their dress. The garments were constrictive in peculiar places, causing Loudly to arch his back more pronouncedly than he might usually, which in turn brought a swell to his chest that, despite his lack of womanly endowments, filled the looseness of his shirt's breast quite fittingly. And after he had smiled up at the wolf, that false sincere smile he'd practiced so studiously in front of mirrors since he was old enough to know how handsome he was, whatever doubts the drunken sailor might have had about the sex of the maid kneeling between him and the bare marble wall were vanished.

"You've had your kisses, sir sailor," said Loudly in that high voice again, sliding his gloved paws down the chest and belly of the large wolf's jacket, appreciating the hard muscle beneath the thick cloth enough that he could almost forget about the precariousness of his situation. Just around the corner, after all, the vixen maid whose clothes he now wore slept in the corridor, naked and drunk, as plain to see to anyone passing as Loudly was as he reached for the buttons of the wolf's trousers. But he kept his wits about him and smiled that smile at the wolf as



he tugged open one button after another, dousing himself in the intoxicating scent of aroused male. "It's only fair," he continued, reaching into the opened fly under the belt buckle, "that your little friend receives some as well."

Whatever gentlemanly inclination the wolf had shown so far was swept away by the male's

tempestuous lusts, and Loudly had no more time to finish speaking than he had to admire the thing he brought out of the confines of the sailor's trousers, because the rough hands that had rested on his shoulders suddenly cupped his chin and the back of his head and Loudly's last word was muffled by warm, turgid flesh insinuating itself in his muzzle.

A groan that could rival many a lion's roar emanated from the wolf's throat and echoed through the mansion's stone corridors and it was that, rather than the boorish violation of his mouth, that made Loudly pin back his ears. He concentrated on listening for the sound of creaking doors, of footsteps or the groggy moaning of an awakening vixen maid, while a trait of Loudly's that had helped save him from as much trouble as it had helped him get into manifested itself while his mind was otherwise engaged.

The mouth engulfing the sailor's pride, which had been to the wolf merely a warm, wet harbour in which to dock, became a whirlwind of sensations. Hollowed cheeks, bobbing muzzle, flexing tongue and clenching throat followed each other in such rapid succession that the wolf was clearly powerless to distinguish them. Even Loudly, who was concentrating on listening past the wolf's disbelieving whimpers, was surprised at himself. His muzzle had always been one of his more popular attributes among the males he'd offered it to, and one of his more successful tools to achieve the various goals of his schemes, but the smoothness with which he combined the efforts to pleasure the wolf with the need to draw breath distracted him from his vigil. He focused instead on what his muzzle was doing, trying to remember its actions for later repetition.

Deep draws, the wolf's thick member goaded down his gullet by teasing flicks of his thin, pink tongue, then hard suction and harder swallows, Loudly's snout pressed deep into the folds of the sailor's open trousers. The hands on his head were slack, the wolf's will to take his pleasure evaporated by the heat of the sensations Loudly's muzzle provided, and a high, soft whine accompanied each of the wolf's laboured breaths.

Loudly took a moment to experience the act for himself—as usual, he had allowed himself to become so distracted by such trivialities as founded paranoia and fear of discovery and death that he had forgotten to enjoy the physical and emotional union that was taking place between...whoever this wolf was and...whoever this wolf thought Loudly was. Perhaps, he allowed, it wasn't so spiritual a union after all, but he was still a fox and the enjoyment of another male's pleasure was his birthright.

The sailor's tapered tip slid easily down Loudly's throat, and the unswollen knot at the base caused him a little thrill every time it pressed between his lip-covered jaws. The muscles he felt under the blue jacket he clutched in his paws were hard, and with his eyes closed Loudly imagined the sailor bereft of his uniform. Dark grey of fur and powerfully built, with streaks of lighter grey on his muzzle and his chest indicating that the follies of youth had been left far behind, the wolf towered over the kneeling fox.

The spell was broken when the wolf suddenly leaned forward, one strong hand gripping his snout while the other sought the support of the wall beside him, and sharply drew his hips back, unsheathing half his red member from Loudly's eager muzzle with a rush of mixed fluids that made a small splash on the white tile below. Inquisitively, Loudly canted his head, stilling his muzzle's urge to suckle and swallow and take the wolf deeper. Had the sailor changed his mind? Or perhaps heard something that Loudly, lost in the act, had missed?

"My dear," said the tall, panting wolf, slowly drawing his member farther out from between Loudly's lips, "You have too fine a muzzle for me to soil it with my fluids, and too pretty a face for me to paint it..." Loudly kept his lips pressed to the wolf's tip, lightly flicking his tongue across the underside, all the while demurely looking up at the tall male. "Is there perhaps another place where you might show me some hospitality?"

The eagerness in the wolf's voice reminded Loudly of nothing so much as a teenager convinced of his own subtlety in propositioning a potential playmate. Despite the danger surrounding him and the urgent necessity for immediate escape, Loudly actually allowed

himself to be charmed by the wolf's needful tact. "You'd be welcome in my parlour, sir, though anything but the briefest dalliance there might stir cubs from their crib," Loudly said cryptically, piecing together such euphemisms and poetry as he could remember, though the look of bafflement on the poor wolf's face and the flagging of his member told Loudly he'd taken his allusions to a degree of crypticism beyond the inebriated lupine's faculties.

"However, the service entrance..." Loudly's point was made even before he had the chance to finish his sentence, as the eager nodding of the wolf's red shaft, such a comical contrast to the blue Naval trousers from which it sprouted, could attest. He took the wolf's desperately proffered hand and found himself drawn up in a fashion that a true lady might have found quite rough. Being neither a true lady nor even dressed as one, he took the wolf's tug in stride and turned as he stood, pressing his chest against the wall, lest the wolf should grope there and wonder at the lack of volume.

Glad that he'd tucked his tail under the skirt's hem rather than the hole tailored beneath the waistline, it was now merely a question of raising his tail to lift the back of his skirt. A thought occurred to Loudly as he did so and he quickly brought his thighs together to keep his own masculinity well-hidden, looking over his shoulder to note with some relief that the wolf, now positioning himself behind the presenting fox, took the gesture in stride, no doubt assuming it was meant to dissuade the wolf from entering the vixen's 'parlour' by accident.

That the wolf would enjoy himself didn't bear questioning—Loudly had a reputation for having one of the finest 'service entrances' around, and even if he were unconscious during the act, the males who entered him there (by invitation or otherwise) never had anything but the highest praise. So the grunts of the wolf and the whine that returned to the male's voice as he slid his saliva-slickened erection between the fox's soft, white-furred buns, were most certainly genuine.

Reassured that the wolf would take care of his own business, Loudly quickly took stock of his situation. The blue moonlight would soon be overtaken by the warmer blue of dawn and by

the time the wolf finished the grunting, thrusting, spending of his urges, most of the guests would begin retiring. He folded his ears and whined as he realised that whatever carriages were waiting outside had probably already borne the early departures to their homes and that anyone still enjoying the party in the dining hall, whose din could be heard faintly thrumming even through the glass and marble of the mansion, would be given rooms in which to rest. Escaping the mansion seemed less and less an option.

The whining and the set of his ears seemed to spark the sailor's lusts to greater heights, and Loudly briefly wondered at that, until he thought perhaps the wolf saw these as symptoms of discomfort at being entered by so rough a male as he. In truth, the wolf's girth was nothing Loudly was unaccustomed to and, as it had been in his muzzle, the shape was most pleasing to have inside him, but even as a plan started to form in Loudly's mind he maintained the whining to please the handsome sailor.

And from the feel of it, the wolf was well pleased. The medals pinned to his jacket and the buckle of his belt both rekindled the aches of the fox's fall on hard marble and added to the bruises, though none, of course, would show through his thick pelt. Hot, wet breath warmed the backs of his ears: hard and masculine panting muffled through clenched teeth mixed with the sound of a uniformed groin smacking against a bare fox—vixen's—behind, the epaulets and medals and the dagger at the wolf's hip all jangling. To mute the sound, Loudly ventured one of his gloved paws away from the wall against which he braced himself and grasped behind him at the wolf's hip, silencing the rattling of the dagger's sheath and urging the male to finish his mating. Time was growing short, and his rear was beginning to ache from the prolonged coupling.

Loudly tried not to think of the increasing risk of discovery by letting his mind wander back to the two young noblewolves he'd seen drunkenly dallying in the courtyard. Perhaps one of them was this wolf's son, Loudly thought with a smirk, pressing his gorgeous tail-end back against the sailor's deep, needful thrusts, and just as he was pondering which of the two might have been the sailor's kin, the slender in gold

silk or the broad in dark velvet, he had to stifle a yelp at the sudden entry of the wolf's knot.

Despite himself, Loudly shivered at the sensation of another male's climax inside him, just as he'd done every time he experienced it since that very first occasion so long ago. To feel a male pressing against your back, his body tight and his mind blank in utter obedience of Nature's call, that was a precious thing. Warm seed spilled into him and Loudly fancied he could feel the spurts of it, the hard flexings of the wolf's engorged member, and the torrents of seed...

As is often the case with drunken matings, the deed ended with a finality that left no question and a great deal of awkwardness, the latter particularly on the wolf's part. His passions spent, the wolf realised where he was—balls-deep in a vixen he wasn't married to, a maid and in her 'service entrance', no less. That sudden realisation made the wolf stiffen far more than a bucket of water might have. Loudly's ears swiveled back at a throaty gurgling sound that sounded very much as though the wolf might heave up the dinner he'd just consumed.

No such thing seemed forthcoming, though the sailor pulled his spent member out with a great deal more impatience than is common for canids and Loudly had to quickly drop his tail and clench his buttocks together to keep the wolf's issuance from spilling down his thighs. Without looking at the fox, the wolf stepped away and refastened his buttons.

Loudly simply leaned against the wall. He was well accustomed to such treatment, and didn't resent it. The wolf was coming to his senses—he was thinking with his brain instead of his 'little friend' and his brain showed him images, no doubt, of a socially ambitious wolfess who shared his bed and his name, and of their cubs perhaps, and made him think of the scandal and the depravity of a dalliance with a maid in the employ of his host. Without even making a lame excuse or an apology the wolf turned and positively marched down one of the corridors.

Waiting a moment or two for the crisp footsteps to quieten with distance, Loudly drew from the waistband of his skirt the ceremonial silver dagger he'd slipped out of the gleaming sheath at the sailor's belt. He stood upright and straightened his shirt—blouse—and in a manner that was anything but ladylike, he lifted his tail and probed underneath with two fingers. He found the act distasteful, which wasn't something that was common for the fox Loudly, and when he lowered his tail again his index and middle finger were coated in the wolf's fluids.

He chuckled, again, as he imagined the sight of himself. A fox—no, a vixen, dressed in the manner of a maid, with some thistles and leaves nestled in her pelt, her left hand bearing the semen of the wolf who just mounted her and her right, a shiny dagger.

But he wasn't a vixen. He was Loudly, the fox, and he now knew how to proceed. Two steps and he turned the corner, where a groggy, naked vixen was snoozing lightly on her back, her breasts showing a shiver at the chill her body no doubt suffered. She was pretty, Loudly admitted as he walked around her naked form, and bore a striking resemblance to him. The strong odor of wine indicated to



Loudly that she had been as drunk as the wolf chasing her, and her nakedness indicated that she had been a willing quarry of his chase

He knelt by her side and she stirred lightly in her sleep, tilting her muzzle to rest against his knee. Loudly smiled at that, it made her look so very interesting. How many males had she dallied with, Loudly wondered. Perhaps she had a reputation among the guests of the mansion lord's parties. She moaned only a little when he brought his hand between her legs and arched her back in that feminine fashion as his slimy-wet fingers slipped into her tight sex. Loudly had to turn his head away from the strong scent of heat she emitted, which was hard for a male fox to bear, even of the persuasion that Loudly, the fox, espoused.

Pulling his fingers free, he wiped them clean over the vixen's muzzle, matted the teardrop black markings down the sides of her snout and when her pink tongue darted out as if to invite his fingers into her muzzle, he had to chuckle at that. Perhaps the sailor would have enjoyed dallying with her more than he had with Loudly. Perhaps she'd have goaded him on more and made him feel more rewarded.

Loudly sighed and, putting all such thoughts aside, he placed the tip of the sharp, thin dagger between the vixen's breasts. Baling his other hand into a fist, he hammered it deep into the vixen's chest.

He had done it just right, as usual, because the vixen's last breath left her lips peacefully without her ever waking. The white fur of her breast started to soak in the blood seeping from around the shiny dagger, turning as red as the rest of her russet fur. Satisfied, and with a soft smile on his lips, Loudly walked away, carrying in his heart that warmth that would always nestle there when his devious genius devised a clever solution to any problem.



Escaping from a lord's estate when it is surrounded by miles of sparse woodland and regular patrols against poachers is a hard task. Hiding on such an estate is easier, however, and that is what Loudly had resolved to do. The vixen was found, the dagger identified and the

sailor was brought before the lord of the house, Loudly heard from the various cupboards, archways and balconies where he hid himself.

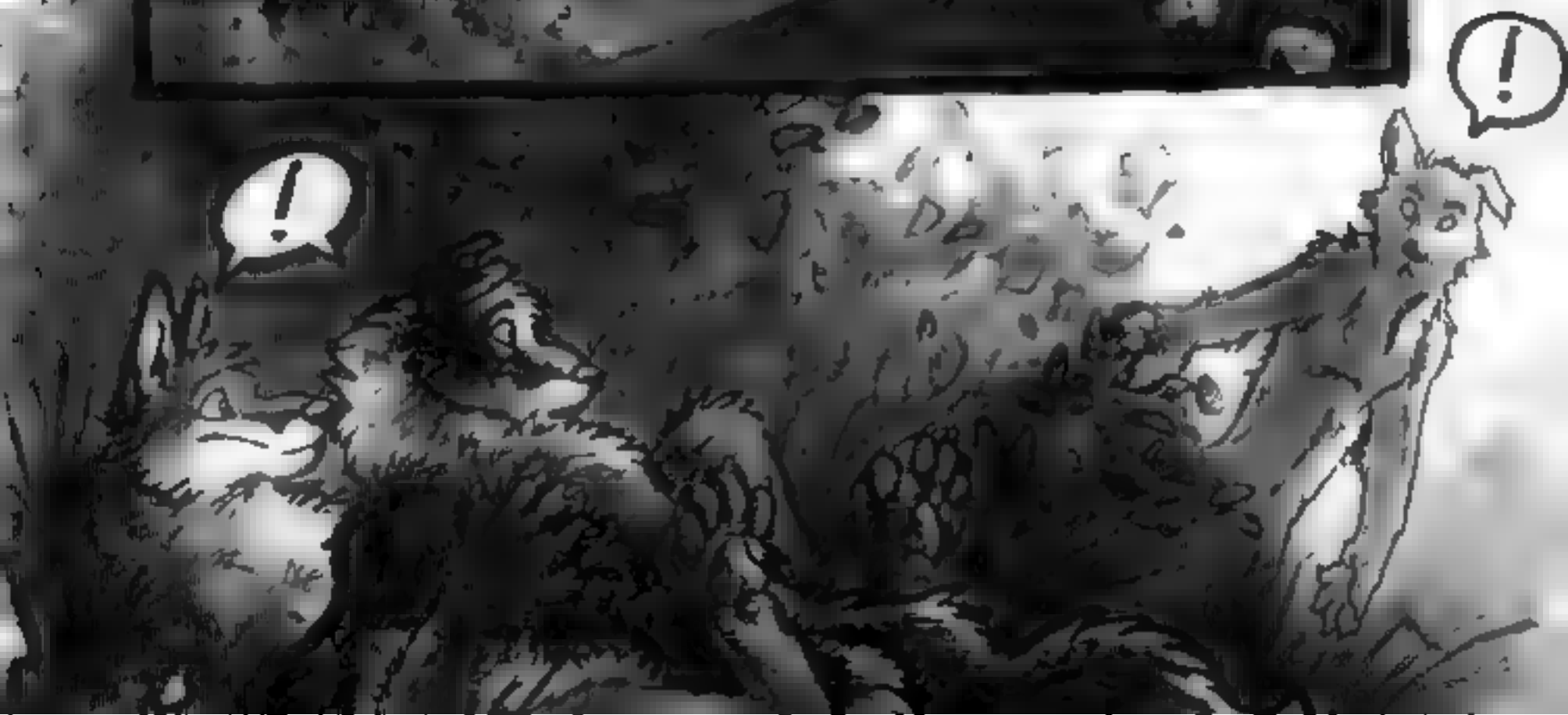
Unable to offer any evidence to the contrary, it was established that the wolf, who had been seen leaving the dining hall after the maid had left with some glasses, had chased her and coupled with her. By his statement, it was a mutual attraction and he had no idea how his dagger was used in her murder, but the wolf's reputation as a brutal soldier and a fiercely jealous husband quickly shaped a rumour that after he had spilled his seed in her, he had realized she was in heat and that a cub was imminent. Both the vixen's heat and the identity of the person who ejaculated the seed found on and in her body were easily detectable by anyone with a nose. If there was a scent of male fox as well, it was dismissed along with the horde of other scents that clung to her cooling body.

The issue was, as was traditional for the nobility, not settled immediately and the wolf was remanded to the local constabulary's custody until a resolution could be found that would leave as much honour as possible intact; after all, it was only a maid that had been murdered.

Still, it was quite a blow to the household, and so, when a vixen with neat clothes and a modest manner presented herself at the mansion's door only a day after the grisly incident, asking for a position in the household's staff, she was quickly admitted. Explaining that she was new to these parts, that she'd come here to work on the farmstead of a relative who'd died shortly after her arrival, the vixen continued that she'd heard of the ghastly events in the mansion and, with the greatest respect to the lord of the mansion and the household staff for their loss, wondered if perhaps they could use her to fill the deceased vixen's position?

Loudly's charm, as himself or in the guise of an impoverished vixen, was always irresistible. While a mere two days earlier, he'd wanted nothing more than to escape from this mansion, that streak of a devil inside him bade him embrace this new opportunity. Alertly, and diligently Loudly the fox set to work in the mansion, keeping his eyes and ears peeled for whatever chances would come his way.

Chance: Happenstanced













First Taste



by Reshan

Everyone has a secret desire, our weakness, something dirty and shameful that we hide from the world. An addiction. For me it was sex.

When you fall from grace, it's not hitting rock bottom that hurts the worst, but realizing you've hit it, then looking back at where you first stepped off the ledge.

It started out small enough. Well, eight inches, small right? Size is relative, and as that, but it does matter, and... Getting ahead of myself. Eight inches of black latex, almost as thick as my wrist, with a motor inside that'd make your teeth chatter when set on "richter scale." It was a Catbrooke model BR453, "Rocket". To me, it was Bruce. Oh the batteries we went through...

Back in high school, I knew other girls were having sex, and I wanted to too, but the boys wouldn't even look at me. I didn't blame them. A pipsqueak of a mouse, barely any curves to speak of, dressed like a school marm or a nun-to-be with bottle glasses, straight A's, one of three Valedictorians. I was invisible at best. I ached for all the things a girl does: love, affection, companionship, and a rock hard dick sating my needs. But I couldn't have it, so I settled for focusing on school work and picked up Bruce. I love the internet.

illustrated by



Maybe I focused on school a little too hard. Putting all that frustrated energy and all my loneliness into my studies meant suffering in the friends department. Being an only child with cousins who lived out of state meant I grew up surrounded by adults; it's why I relate to teachers much more than my peers. Since I wasn't predisposed to be a social butterfly, there was no incentive to try and no successes, aside from the tiny ring of invisibles and castaways that clung together like survivors in the debris of a capsized ship. But all that achievement scored me enough scholarships to have pick of the litter for schools, which tore me away from the circle of confidants I was so interwoven with.

I always told myself that as soon as I reached a higher level of education the kids would be different, would appreciate my intelligence and my character and not the fact I looked like I was *born* to be a nerd. In *Sally* that turned out to be the hormone breeding pit and the cultural battleground of high school amounted to a micro-cultural battle ground, and college became a shadow of high school with harder classes.

Old habits die hard; I stayed in the same rut. Hard work, avoiding any semblance of a social life, and watching everyone have fun outside my bubble of isolation. Except this time, two things were different. First, I discovered online sex. Sure, erotica and fanfiction were interesting for ideas of fantasies, but the interactive nature of the internet really opened up to me. I got to roleplay actual hot sex and explore fantasies, and it hit me like a sledge hammer. Since freshman classes were light weight, I spent a lot of free time on the computer, and upgraded to a new toy (named Duke).

The second exception was the fact that I had a roommate. Back home I had my own room and parents who gave space, but now the issue of privacy reared its ugly head. To say the least, there were many a long night I wish I could have had Bruce or Mike, especially with the online stuff really taking off. So, mentally I was exhilarated and filled with pleasure and desire and all these new ideas, but now I was really, really getting sexually frustrated. Toward the end of the semester, I just said fuck it, grabbed one of my Boys and started blowing off some steam in a bathroom stall.

After spending the summer back home with more quality time between me, my toys and my computer, I came back to college to a new roommate. Carmelita was the opposite of me: athletic, curvy, energetic, and above all, a party girl. A built jaguar on the volleyball team and in a sorority, she considered herself an expert on dating, fashion, and men. Her brand of "encouragement" also reinforced my dismal opinion of my appearance, such as dropping a half-full box of pizza on my homework and declaring, "You have to eat something to get some curves, chica."

Another one of her charming qualities was the belief that spending my weekends in front of a screen was a grave sin. I should be "experiencing the great opportunity of college." Initially I loved the privacy when she went out, but after the first few weeks it became a weekly regret to be left behind. She wanted to drag me out to "have fun".

Eventually, I caved.

Naturally, she took me to the worst place possible for a girl with body image issues who believes boys can't see her: a frat party. Scratch that, a kegget. Carmelita was under the impression that as soon as I dived in head first I'd take to it like an otter to water. Yeah, right. Proving her wrong was no victory I took pride in, and it didn't stop her from hassling me the next weekend either. But something did come of it.

Almost as soon as we walked through the door Carmelita waded into the throng of people like she belonged. Oh sure, she introduced me to a few of her "sisters" and a boy or two, but the former were too chatty with each other for me to really feel at ease with the conversation and the latter paid too much attention to my roommate's chest. After that, it felt like we were at some sporting event—my roommate on the court, doing her thing like she was born to do it, while on the side, I awkwardly cheered her on at first, before soon losing interest.

To say the party initially was a drag is an understatement. I played the part of the well-behaved about thirty minutes, tried to take the initiative by diving into a conversation or two and ending up failing with flying colors, and stumbled over myself to avoid a few drunks who looked

drunk enough to puke on me at a moment's notice. Eventually I spotted a freshman who looked like she was in the same situation as me. Angelique, I think. We huddled together and talked, and for a while I felt good. That's when things started to really pick up.

I'd been drinking. It was my first time, and in addition to seeing what all the fuss was about, my plan was that after a few beers I'd loosen up. Despite the stuff tasting awful, I downed two or three cups, and after talking with Angelique so long, nature was ringing pretty loud. Seems nature was having a conference call—both the downstairs and upstairs hall bathroom was occupied. The one in the master bedroom of the frat house was thankfully empty.

Once finished, I glanced into the mirror. Carmelita had attempted miracles to give me a makeover, but one is limited by the resources at paw; those thick glasses perched on my snov-god muzzle, and I still wore capped five-foot one. Rather than in its braid, my black hair bounced in curls. A snug t-shirt I didn't wear too often, which did nothing to hide my scrawny shoulders, had been carved to complement what little chest I had. Below that hung a skirt I'd been willing to part with, left to the Jaguar's artful tearing to show off some thin legs. The big hoop earrings my roommate had lent looked goofy in my ears; they just hung there like coasters. Dress heels ended the little outfit that couldn't.

Staring hard at my reflection, I took a second to step back from my growing self-hatred. I did not look bad. Not able to compete with the half-dressed bunnies and foxes downstairs, but all right. Maybe it was just my disposition, there I was hiding in the corner and too afraid of that look on someone's face when I fumble, can't think of anything to talk to them about, and stutter to silence. Other people, especially in crowds, were scary.

That sounded pretty miserable. Or it would have been the beer talking.

My thoughts were shattered by a slamming door. In the bedroom adjacent to the bathroom I could pick up hushed whispers and rustling. Staying as quiet as... well, a mouse, I listened. More of the same, with the occasional wet

smack. Cradling the doorknob, I eased it in a turn, and slid the door open a crack.

A couple was sexually mauling one another. From the way they were standing, I could only see him from behind. He stood tall, lean and really slinky, some weasel or mink, and his dark hair hung up in some Asian topknot. Gripping the back of his head clutched a dark paw, and the sound of wet kissing was everywhere while the other paw groped up and down his back and I could hear necks sliding against the ruyon of his tight top. Said partner didn't let his shirt stay on long, peeling the muscled top off and baring an expanse of dark honeycomb. His pants didn't last long either, and I had a good eye full of the taut legs and an ass so tight and hot the center of a pair of silky little boxers.

Even if he had picked her over me, it would have been too rude to walk out of the bathroom and get the hell out of there; disrupting their moment could have ended the guy's chances. Shutting the door and just waiting in there would have been too good because just stepping to them fuck would have driven me crazy. So I watched.

Dropping a hand to my breast, I began to squeeze. It was dirty to be getting off intruding on their moment, but the weasel was kicking up some fierce, spicy musk, and the alcohol had coursed through my whole body, making me feel so good.

Behind his partner swayed a hand-dart—dark and chestnut brown, something I assumed belonged to a cat. When she leaned down, grabbing one of her tits to suck on, the hunch was confirmed. I recognized her—a girl that sat a row or two away in my Comprehensive Writing course, a little brunette with a full figure named Lily. I could see the back nipples of the large breast as paw was mauling, and the way her eyes crinkled shut, with flared nostrils and whiskers twitching, how she hissed into his ear. I knew he was sucking good and rough on the other. Teeth settled over his ear as she stuffed a paw into the back of his boxers. That got his attention.

It got mine too. Watching with bated breath I stared at the pair, palm kneading over my breast. As the weasel worked her nipple



juicy enough to make you want to sink your teeth into it. Lilly's fingers dug into the curvature, making the furred flesh dent. That lit a match to her boy's fuse—he shoved her backwards onto the bed. From there he practically tore her jeans off and yanked a little red thong up off her ankles. Apparently he liked those legs up in the air—wrapping his paws around her ankles and leaning forward, he bent her in half.

It occurred to me that I was still watching them. Sure, you'd think that'd be obvious, but if I could see them, they could see me—Lilly at least—so I wisely repositioned myself. Laying down onto my knees, I lay down and scooted around until my head rested next to the door's crack, peering out at them. Drop-

ping a hand to pull my skirt up, I traced myself through the common cotton of my panties. I know the details of my feminine geography like the back of my hand, but it doesn't stop one from prolonging the tease, caressing every sensitive spot.

With the shifted angle, I had a perfect, unobstructed and safe view of the action. His pink-white shaft, long and thin, moved up

around, tugging on it roughly, I did the same to my own. He pulled it back and forth, I rubbed the hard nub around. My other paw sneaked downwards, palm grinding across the inside of a thigh, before I squeezed both of them around my hand. It must have been the booze taking away my inhibitions.

Down went the mustelid's boxers, peeled off that peach of an ass. It was taut with lean muscle, melting into equally-toned, powerful thighs,

into position above her flush, black mound. Crotches met with a wicked, wet slap, and they were off, fucking with such tenacity that I could feel it from ten feet away

Musk, rich and twanged with both genders, flooded the room. Juice-slicked flesh smacked together and joined with the grunts, hisses, and moans, making a sexual symphony that had me drunker than the cheap tap downstairs. I dragged the bothersome panel of my panties aside, giving room to work over now sopping folds. The courting of thumb and clit hood lasted far too

long, but being sensitive it required careful affection. The rest did not. Without further a due, two fingers eagerly filed me, quickly stirring in a hungry circle, and from there my digits spread, stroking all around with the swirl of my wrist

If there's one thing to say about those living Shinkys that are mustelids, it's that they can fuck. Lilly's boy pressed her ankles as high as he was going to get them, and made her hold them, while his hands went .. somewhere I couldn't see, but I assume solid enough to brace. Because suddenly he was doing pushups, shoving his shoulders back. That force traveled right down his spine, muscles rippling in its wake, and with the ferocity of his thighs' pumps he was driving the headboard into the wall at a demanding rate. The rhythm matched the dull thump of the boy's nuts across one of Lilly's broad ass cheeks. Above him, the mustelid's tail wafted like some streamer caught in the wind, graceful tremors telegraphing his every motion

Compared to the racket they were making, I was silent. Not too great a challenge. I had spent a few nights

EXTENSIVE AND BOOK



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myself to believe in what my roommate slept none the wiser. While my heart beat against my ribs like a coked out drummer, slow, even breaths came out of me. It became something to concentrate on while fingers fluttered about inside of me, then got down to business, pumping away hard enough to grate knuckles over the heat-flushed skin of my mons. Skin whisked across the linoleum as my tail undulated with every finger's shuffle.

Technique, not just enthusiasm, was part of the beau's repertoire. Winding fingers around Lilly's ankles, he spread her legs lewdly wide, to the point she hissed in discomfort. From there, the mustelid dipped his hips downwards and began to bounce her on his lap. Apparently the shift in angle did something for her, because it reduced the 'coon to desperate squeals. Suddenly her tail beat against the bed and an urgent, keening chitter erupted. I swear I could see the fluids bubbling out of her. One of the male's paws darted downwards, grinding his heel vigorously over the top of her dark quim.

Staring but barely seeing, I gritted my teeth at the feel the tension building. Close, so close. Taking my hip some, I raised my upper leg and planted a foot on the floor, spreading thighs and really giving me room to work. Being as experienced as I was with myself, it didn't take long to strum all the right chords. With a little work from my wrist, I found it, that sweet spot. The pressure applied to it curled my toes and put boiling tension on the interior, and was more intense than a root canal. Despite the sensation, I needed more; with a swivel of my hand I quickly started assailing the pearl of my clit. It became just a matter of pressing down and whisking back and forth, rubbing feverishly in between pinching into me further down.

I lost track of the couple in front of me. Sure, I was staring at the meeting of flesh, imaging that was me being drilled so well by him rather than by myself, but other than that I had no clue what was going on. Pressing and rubbing fingers back and forth, working... Working... The pressure was too much. Finally I turned my head, stuffed my nose into the crook of the other arm, bit down, and let out a great, muffled moan. \

I could see was stars. Having my fingers saturated beneath the flow of fluids, clenched and milked by the quake of my muscles, was merely secondary to the full body roll inside of me like some internal fireworks show.

Lying on the floor, riding the ebbing crest of ecstasy, I worked to keep on going. With a bit of elbow grease and some strumming, the lowest part of one climax became the beginning of another. There's no telling how long I stayed there, just toying away, an endless loop of semi-coherent surges of endorphins and fluids.

*...was great, but I need to clean up first."

Lilly's words cut through my euphoria like a wrecking ball. I sat up as quick as I could, sucking in a sudden breath. Oh shit. I practically jumped to my feet—bad idea, as my heels didn't want to find purchase on the fuzzy bathmat (what college guy has a bath mat!) and my legs were still oh so wobbly from moments before.

With a stroke of panic-stricken creativity, I stepped out of my heels, into the tub, and then huddled in the back behind the shower curtain, silently praying that Lilly wouldn't notice me.

What if they caught me? Everyone at the party would know. It'd be a laughing stock, or labeled a pervert, or a slut. Would people talk to me then? What would Carmelita say?

Several long, tense moments went by as Lilly washed up in the sink, cleaned her self off, and used the commode. She looked at herself in the mirror, primped and a million other things while I was busy turning blue from holding my breath. Finally, she left, and I sagged, opened my eyes, and relaxed.

So Lewd

Then her beau came in. He noticed my heels long enough to kick them aside on his way to the toilet. Apparently he cared less about his hygiene, and once finished, walked back out to continue locking lips with Lilly. After about ten minutes of post-coital play, the two got dressed enough to stumble downstairs for another beer.

I made a run for it. I didn't care about washing up or getting the stink of sex off of me, just made a bee line for the door and out into the night. The whole walk home I thought about it, and the more I walked the hotter I got, the more my thighs rubbed together with each step. The thrill, the excitement, the sheer...wickedness. When I got home, I attacked myself with Duke. Then I enjoyed a well-deserved shower.

When Carmelita came stumbling in about two hours later, we talked. I told her about the evening up until the fated bathroom peepshow. It was hard to talk down about the party when I was still riding the high, but I managed. She dismissed my dour opinion of it all by assuring me that I was just too shy to enjoy myself, and that I'd get over it once I got out there more.

Lying in bed, pretending I could simply ignore it all and go to sleep after that, I couldn't help but reflect upon what I'd done, seen. So hot, so lewd, and they had no clue I was there. It was dirty and I felt guilty, yet just thinking

about watching the pair sent a ruddy glow to my ears, made me warm elsewhere. After half an hour of reflection, I tried to distract myself with some headphones and soothing music, assuring myself that it was a rare occurrence, and I wouldn't have to worry about that sort of thing again. But those same thoughts haunted me for a few weeks almost nonstop. Among other things, they really drove home how much I ached for someone else. I wanted someone. Needed someone. And just waiting for someone to be desperate enough to stumble over me, or to wear their beer goggles...it wasn't a way to live. Lilly wasn't exactly the picture perfection of hot physique, but she managed to score that guy. I actually did something about it, and looked around me, and yes, I even approached some guys. I was still insecure, but that episode turned my sights outward to try to find something of worth, and you know, I learned something: as fucked up as you may be, others are just as fucked up, and just as self-focused as you are about yourself. It wasn't hard to find myself a shy, socially inept boy, and god, the fumbling, disconcerted sex we had.

But that's a story for a different time.

no clue I was there

Nothing Else



The Last Coyote Story

For hundreds of generations there were always new Coyote stories to be told. Some were told out on the plains or up in the mountains or out in the desert. And someone would see them and say, "That's a stupid story. And I won't tell it."

One day the stories stopped. That day there were only old stories to tell over and over. No one knew why, but it seemed Coyote was

that day the many tribes. The Jucksters, They were the Crow, Blue Jay, Horned Lizard, and the Coyote. They were the last of the Coyotes. They were the last of the Coyotes.



Coyote wasn't wise; no, not even close. Coyote was the greatest fool that ever walked the earth. He thought as often with his small head as he did with his big head. No, Coyote was not wise—but he was supremely cunning. When his instincts weren't telling him to go find young mammals by the riverside, they were telling him when danger lurked. And even if Coyote's instincts failed him, his luck was legendary. It is said that his is so because Coyote has stolen the luck of many, many others. With all his tricks, Coyote heated himself up too many times for even him to remember—and he tricked mortals and Tricksters alike.

When the People told Coyote stories, they sometimes changed the endings just a little—so that in the end, Coyote died in the end. This helped teach the lessons to the People's children. Coyote himself never learned. Yet everyone was all right. In all his adventures, Coyote always got away. Just like that, he sometimes was like the bad things like Coyote cannot be made to do any good. He always comes back in one shape or another, chucking as he seeks for more trouble.

The other Tricksters were not so wily or clever as Coyote, and their tricks ran out of fuel. Through countless attempts, they eventually learned from their failures, and became greater Tricksters—but still not quite as good as Coyote. And always, while Coyote watched and danced around them and laughed, laughed at their misfortune, Coyote found it terribly funny that the other Tricksters had to struggle so hard to learn the skills he'd always had from the beginning. The other six Tricksters came to hate Coyote and his raucous laughter.

Among the Sioux there was a Woman Chief who was a legend in her own lifetime. She had the ferocity of any man—and had killed many—even with her bare hands. Her true name is lost to history—but if you mentioned the Woman Chief anywhere on the plains, they would know exactly who you spoke of.

It was, of course, only a matter of time before Coyote heard of Woman Chief. One day Coyote was sauntering himself on a low rise a short way from a village. He was pondering a nap when an ally of his, Cricket, landed square on his nose.

"Coyote!" Cricket exclaimed. "Have I got something to tell you!"

"I was trying to get some rest," said Coyote. "This better be juicy gossip or else I'm going to gabble you up." He snapped his jaws once, to show he meant business.

"I saw a woman as tall as a man!" exclaimed Cricket. "She had wild hair and angry eyes and she hunted alone on the plains!"

"Sounds pretty," Coyote licked his chops. "How big was she?"

"Towering! Taller than a brave!"

"No, that's not what I meant." With his forepaws, Coyote gestured to show Cricket what he meant.

"Oh. Uh, about twelve crickets wide, maybe." Cricket made a tiny shrug. Such things didn't matter to little bugs.

Coyote spun his tail. "And she's a hunter, you say? Sounds like a good time! I like 'em feisty. Where can I find this woman warrior?"

"Actually, she's coming this way," said Cricket. "I just came to warn you."

And just then, Woman Chief came tearing up the hill. She'd caught Coyote's scent from far off—which was actually easy, because Coyote always smelled bad. Woman Chief was truly as large (in every way) as Cricket had described, and her eyes shone with ferocity. Her hair was unbanded and thickly black and whipped all around in the plains winds, and she wore a ragged, unadorned skin. In her fist was a yellowed, curved bone knife. She saw Coyote and gave a violent cry and bar of fire. Then Cricket leaped away.

"Shit," said Coyote. He broke into a run, but kept looking back over his shoulder at Woman Chief. The way her heavy body swayed and bounced as she ran kept distracting Coyote. She chased him into a streambed, and Coyote wasn't watching where he was going. He slipped and tumbled into the stream—and she fell on him with the bone knife poised. He fought like any man would, but she was a difficult opponent. Coyote suddenly got an idea—certainly not a wise idea, but definitely a cunning one.

He let Woman Chief win, and he let her think she'd defeated him honestly. Coyote willingly took the bone knife through his heart, and as he died, he smiled. Coyote always dies smiling.

To Coyote, death is funny. For mortals, death is a great and forever change. But for the hidden spirits of the earth, death is only a short vacation, a little lull in the darkness of elsewhere. The Tricksters are such beings. When

Coyote died, he knew it was only a matter of time before he came back as usual—good as new but still as foolish as ever. However, he would not move on so quickly this time. First, he had something planned for Woman Chief.

Woman Chief skinned Coyote and took only his hide, for coyote meat is lean and tough and disgusting. She tanned her hide for us, gift or a realizing that this was no ordinary coyote but the great Trickster, and brought the hide back to her village. She stretched it on the outside of her tipi, to let it dry in the bright sun.

When the sun had set and it was dark enough to go around unseen, Coyote came back. No one but Tricksters have ever seen how Coyote returns, whether he came as breath on the wind, or through the skinned flesh left behind in the stream. Perhaps he just hopped out his hide. However it happened, Coyote did return and pulled himself off of the side of Woman Chief's tipi.

Coyote could've left the village, and the story could've ended there. But he couldn't get out of his mind the sight of those incredible curves, that wild hair, those mad eyes. He looked between his legs and realized that he was standing straight up. He took his man-form, a handsome, slender youth with pale hair and pale eyes and a cruel smile that belonged on an old man's face. In his man-form, he had a coyote-tooth necklace and a coyote-skin worn tight on his head and chest, and nails that were sharp like claws. In his hand was a flute, and he played this in front of Woman Chief's tipi until she awoke and came out.

Coyote's music is dangerous. It can easily seduce mortals, and can lead men and women to their death. Tonight, however, he played the truest song of love he knew—and because he was a Trickster, he knew how to play it true without feeling it in his own heart.

It is said that Woman Chief never took a husband—although some say she did take a few wives—but when she heard that song, her heart opened. She opened her tipi and let Coyote in, and he said sweet lies to her and captivated her eye and her ear. He pretended to be a young brave from a neighboring tribe, and flattered her with praise, and asked for her hand in marriage. Coyote promised to be with her until they were old. Woman Chief was taken with him, and she accepted.

And then she gave Coyote what he wanted. Several times, actually, and quite noisily.

When Coyote was finally all spent, he gave Woman Chief a nasty smirk, and turned back into the Trickster he was. She cried out and reached for the bone knife, but Coyote was already out of her tipi, faster than lightning. He bounded to the right laughing his loud yapping laugh of triumph. Woman Chief's wrath was horrible; she was shamed beyond anything else she'd endured. She chased after Coyote across the snow-meat plains, pursued him a long way, but the strength was gone from her. She collapsed and for the second time as Coyote escaped.

In older times, the story might've ended there. But the other Tricksters heard Coyote's laughter; it was carried by the four winds to the heavens, where the Tricksters dwelled. Crow, bear, otter, chipmunk, porcupine, then heard it, then the porcupine, spider, heard it, then the swallows, hawks, and they heard it, the shadow of great mountains. And they knew it was time to punish Coyote, and so they came together in secret on the plains—Fox, Hare, Blue Jay, Raven, Crow, and Spider. They revealed themselves to Woman Chief, and told her the truth.

"What do you wish, now?" they asked.

"To kill him," she said.

"Coyote cannot be killed."

"Then to punish him forever," she said.

"That can be done."

And they told her how to do it.

The next day, the Tricksters told all the animals on the plains to leave for a while. The animals did as they were told—they always obeyed the Tricksters—and it came to be that there was nothing but the men, the women, the trees and hills and grasses, and Coyote. Coyote wandered the hills, and his hunger got worse and worse until he began to starve. He had no idea what was going on, and it frustrated him. He tried chewing the berries that grew here and there, even chewing the dry grass, but it wasn't enough. He needed meat. For Coyote, starvation was true torture—even if he starved to death, he would only come back to starve more. And he knew it.

Just as the emptiness in his belly became unbearable, Coyote came upon a huge, fat rabbit sprawled in a meadow. The rabbit did not see or scent Coyote as he approached, and Coyote crouched, ready for the kill.

But just then, Woman Chief appeared again. She was unarmed, naked, and she strode boldly right up to Coyote. Coyote flinched back, but Woman Chief made no motion to hurt him. In fact, she was smiling. Coyote's eyes traveled up and down her naked body, and he realized he was standing straight up again.

She spoke to him.

"I recognize you as my better," said Woman Chief. "I will be your willing wife and care for you every day and night, Coyote. For so long as I live, I will be yours. You can have my flesh whenever you want, and you can say to everyone that you beat Woman Chief and made her yours—a thing no man could ever do."

"You're not going to be all clingy, right?" Coyote gave her a sly glance. "Because I don't like that clingy business. And can I still have maidens on the side?"

"Yes," said Woman Chief, gritting her teeth and biting her lip. She wanted this trick to be over.

"Hot damn!" cried Coyote. "It's perfect!"

"But before you can have me, you must catch me first—as surely as I caught you," said Woman Chief, and broke into a run. At the same moment, the rabbit—which was really Hare in disguise—shot up and bolted off in the other direction. Coyote hadn't seen through Hare's disguise, so hungry he was. Coyote looked frantically back and forth from the fleeing woman to the fleeing fat rabbit, and realized he couldn't decide which he wanted more.

And because Coyote is a peculiar creature, a peculiar thing happened. He split in two—even his spirit split in two. What chased after Woman Chief was a man, Coyote-Boy without the hide—and what chased after Hare was a four-legged, unspeaking beast that was no longer Coyote proper—just his hide come to life.

The Woman Chief allowed Coyote-Boy to capture her. He pinned her and cried out in triumph: "I've got her! I've got her!"

So I am pinned Woman Chief. Tell me why you want me. What is your desire?

Why it's this, Coyote-Boy. I want you to remember. Can Coyote-I don't know.

What do you remember from before? Woman Chief asked.

Only this, Coyote-Boy, said the Coyote-Boy. And then, naked as the plains, they embraced.

Meanwhile, Coyote-Hide chased the fat rabbit that was really Hare in disguise, ravenous with hunger. But like Coyote-Boy, Coyote-Hide was also incomplete; it could not think of any clever tricks to outwit the rabbit anymore. And Hare outraced Coyote-Hide and doubled back on his tracks, then vanished into a burrow. And Coyote-Hide was vexed and let out a howl of fury. Coyote-Hide sniffed the air and smelled Woman Chief's sweet scent—but to Coyote-Hide the scent meant nothing but food. Coyote-Hide gave chase, returning the way it had come.

Woman Chief saw the hungry Coyote-Hide approaching and knew she had to be quick. She roused Coyote-Boy, and pointed to the Coyote-Hide. "That beast, it will kill us!"

And Coyote-Boy leaped up, ready to defend Woman Chief. Coyote-Hide pounced, and the two split halves of Coyote struggled, not realizing what they were doing. Every wound to the hide weakened the boy, and every wound to the boy weakened the hide in turn. Finally Coyote-Boy got his hands around Coyote-Hide and choked him until the hide stopped moving—but then the boy sank to the ground dead, for Coyote had killed himself.

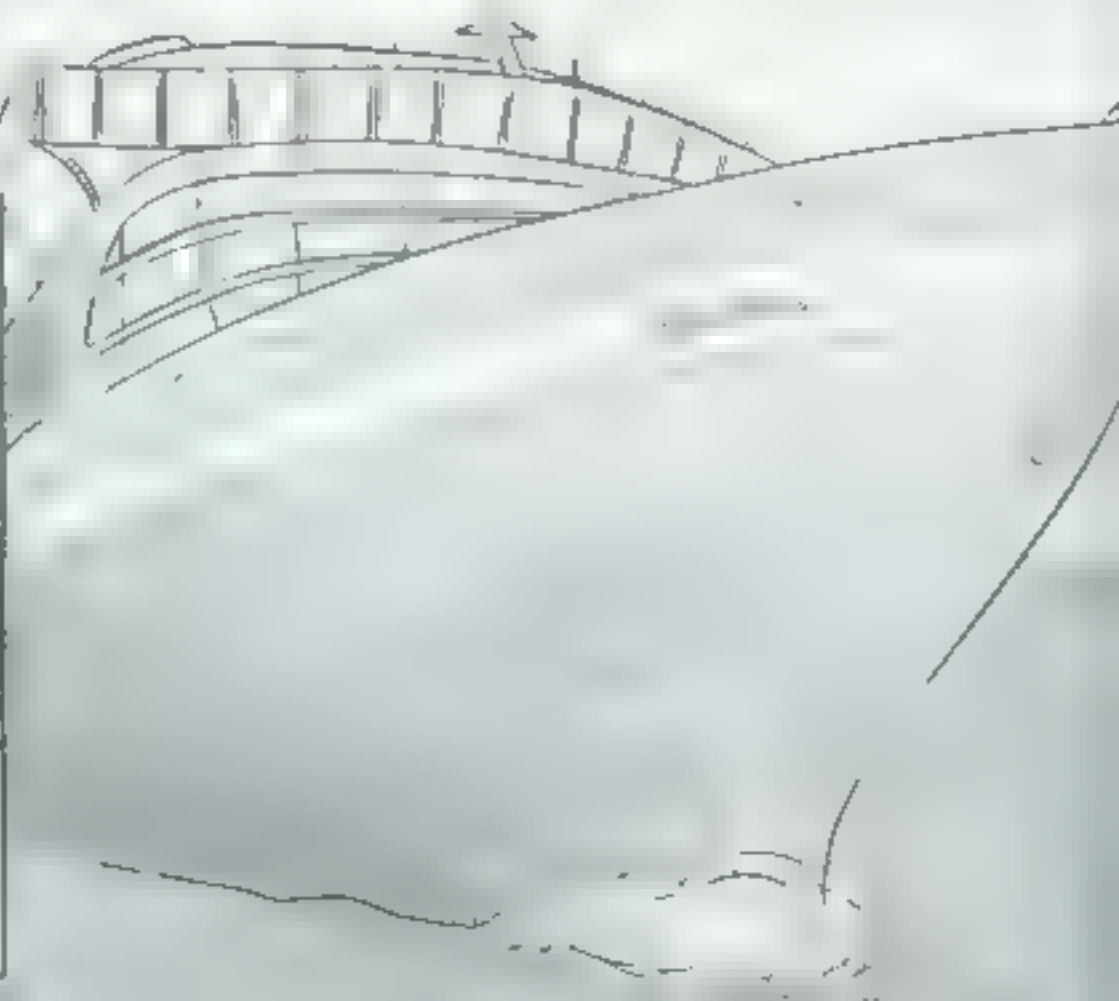
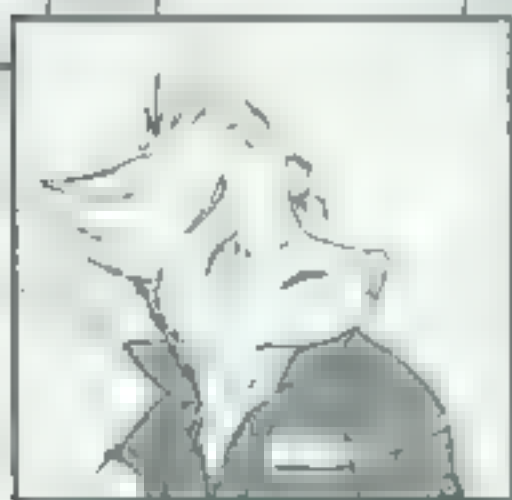
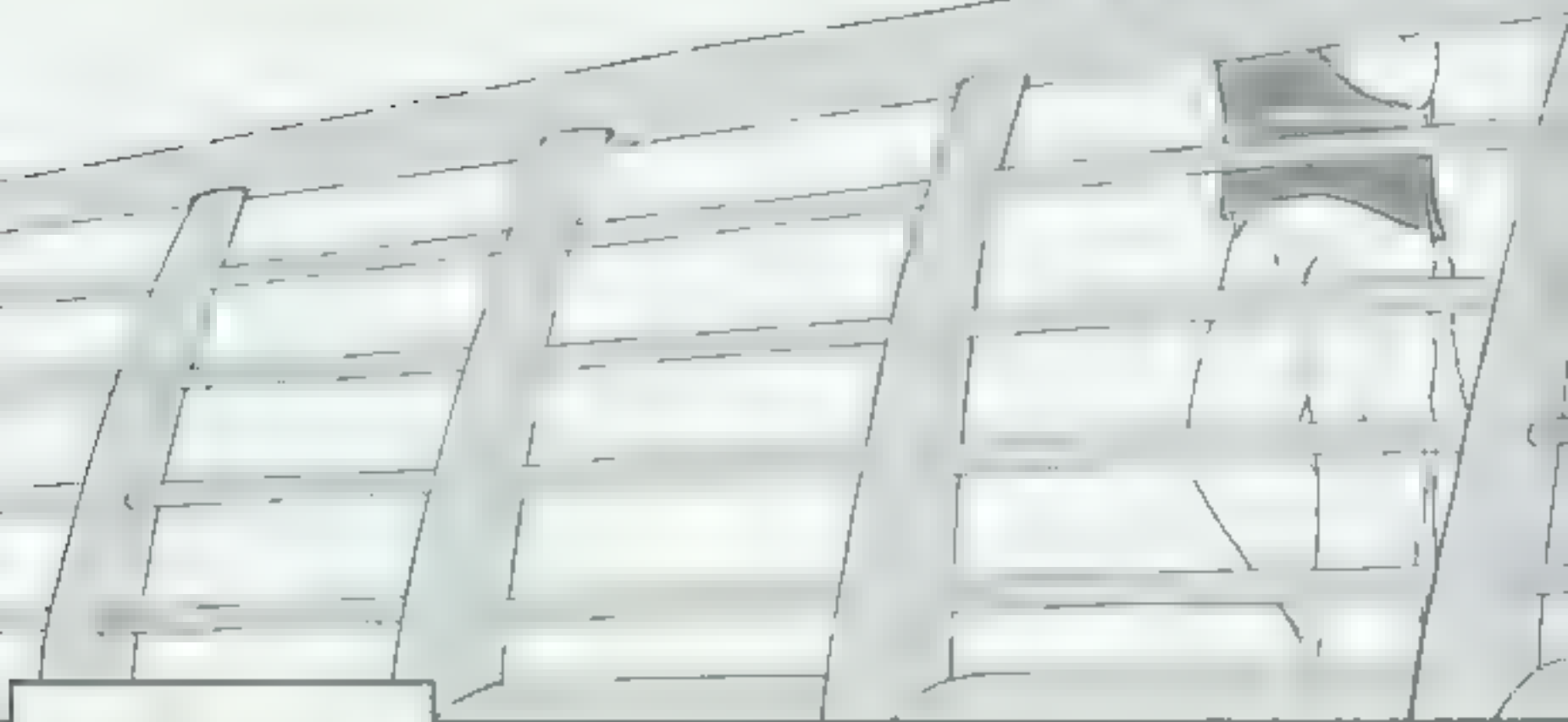
Coyote should have returned after a while, even after being split in two. There would have been more new Coyote stories to tell. But he had been tricked by all his kin and Woman Chief as well. You see, Coyote could not come back from the dead—because he was not truly dead. A tiny part of him lived on, in Woman Chief—and it would go on living, in her children and her children's children, hidden in the flesh of man.

Woman Chief patted her belly, picked up Coyote's hide, and went back to her home.

And they call this the Last Coyote Story.

Motion of the Ocean

By Luke





JESSICA...?

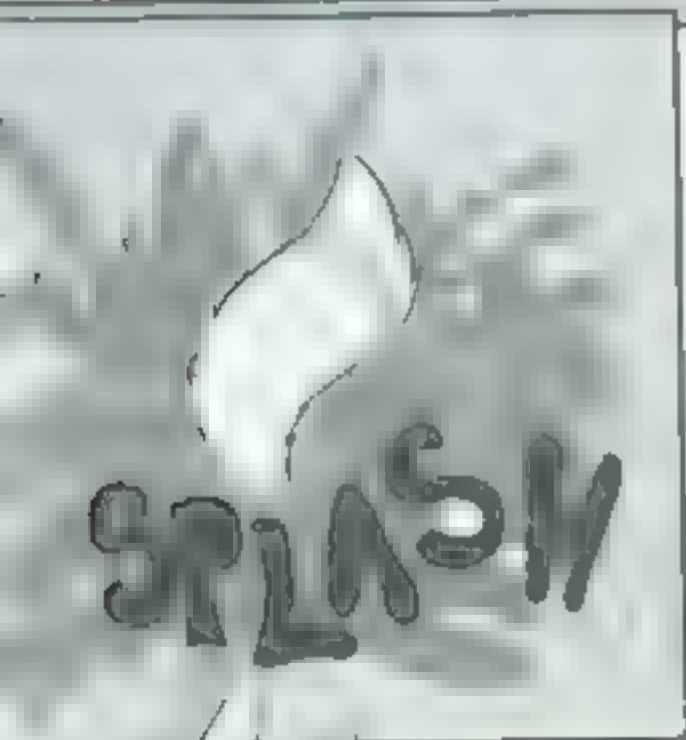
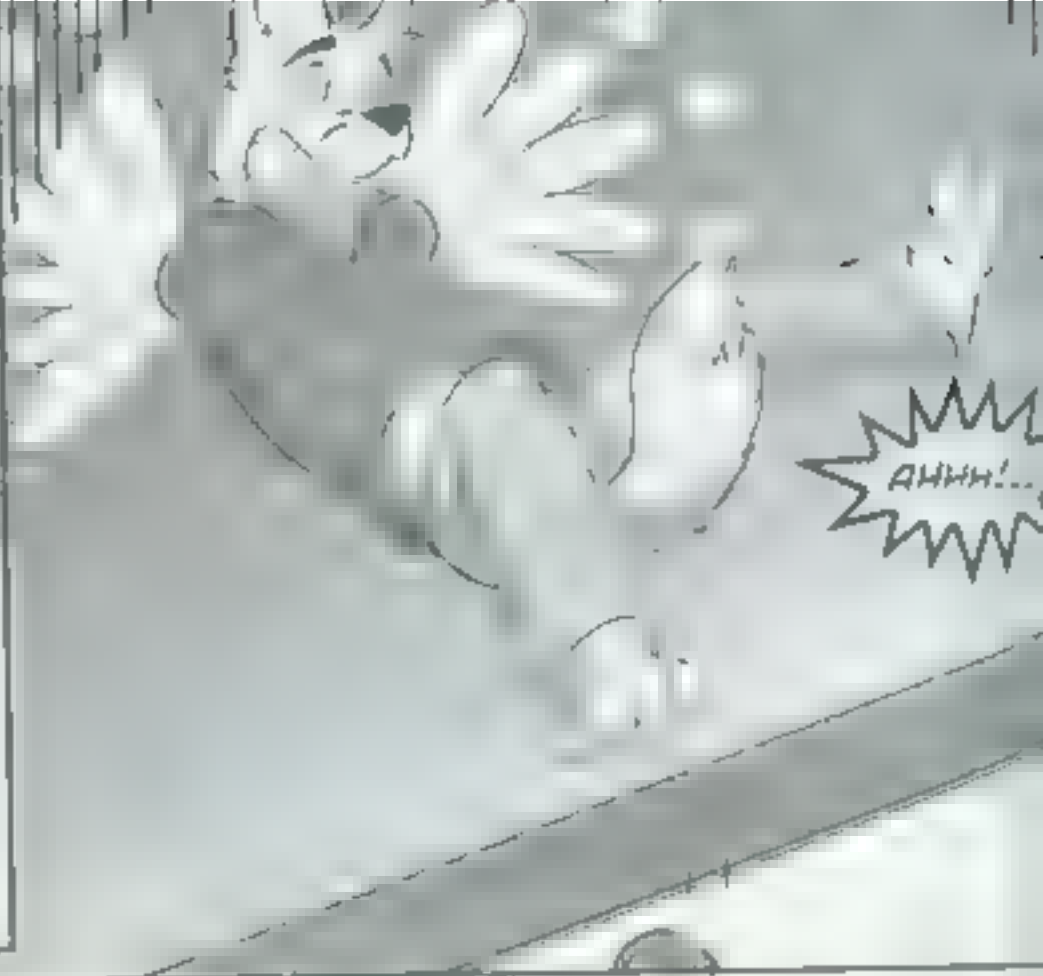
URRRGH...
WHAT IS IT ELLIOT?

IF MOM COMES LOOKING FOR ME,
I'VE GONE BACK TO THE ROOM, OKAY?

YEAH... WHATEVER

I DON'T HAVE TO BE
SUCH A BIT...

... ARRF?





©MICKLEB

COME ON. DON'T WORRY ABOUT THEM.

EASY FOR YOU TO SAY.

NAH, I'M SERIOUS. WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF, DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF YOU

IT REALLY, EVERYONE'S LAUGHING AT ME NOW.

ER .. YEAH, ALRIGHT I GUESS. ANYWAY, THANKS FOR THE HELP.

UM... ELLIOT

WELL, ELLIOT, YOU COULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE NICE BREEZE AND THE WARM SUN, AND DRY OFF OUT HERE. YOU COULD ALSO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE GOOD COMPANY, TOO!

HEY WAIT!? IT'S YOUR NAME?

NICE TO MEET YOU. I'M RYAN.

... ALRIGHT.

NICE TO MEET YOU.



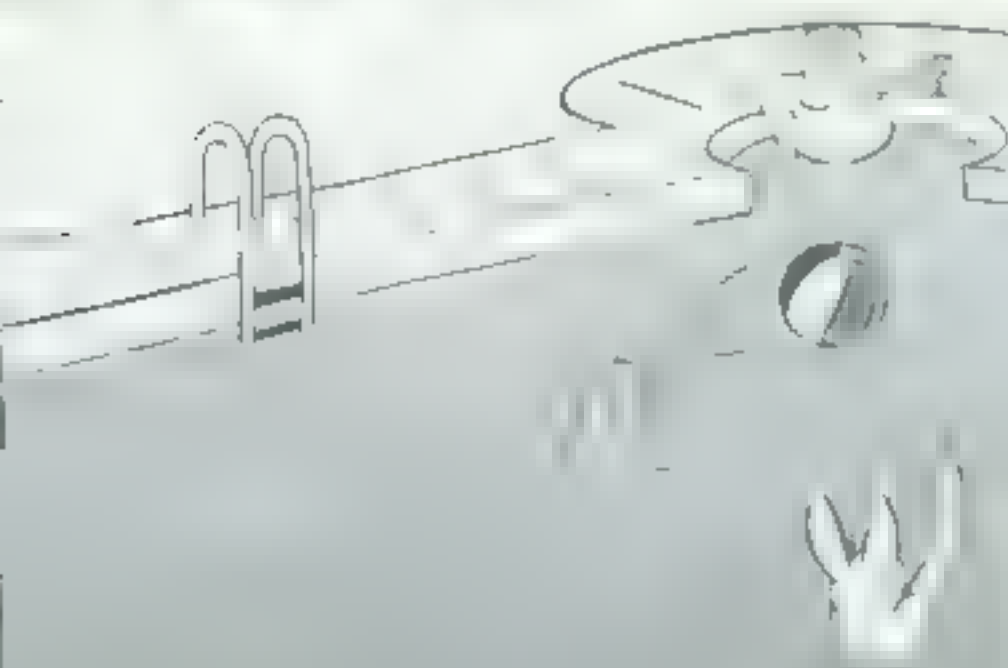
HEY TNA!!! COVER ME FOR AN HOUR WILL YAH? THANKS.



SO YOU'RE A LIFE SAURD ON A CRUISE SHIP, HU? MUST BE NICE TO LIVE IN PARADISE EVERYDAY

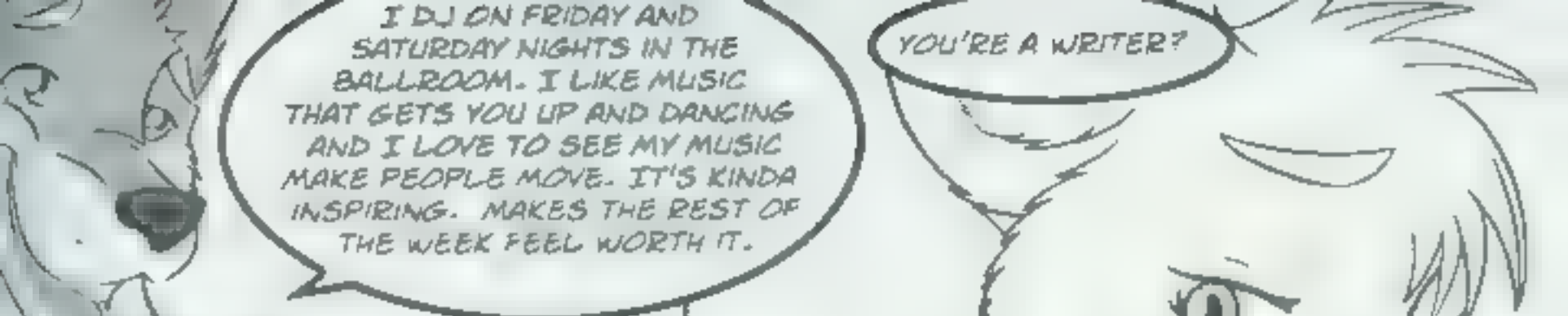


HEH. WELL, ACTUALLY, IT GETS OLD QUICKER THAN YOLD THINK. MOSTLY I JUST HAVE TO SIT AROUND, PANTING IN THE HEAT, WATCHING RICH PEOPLE AND SPOILED KIDS BLISSFULLY BEING THE GREAT CUSTOMERS THEY ARE. IT'S REALLY NOT ALL THAT FUN. BUT THAT'S OKAY, REALLY. I LOVE MY OTHER JOB.



YOUR OTHER JOB?



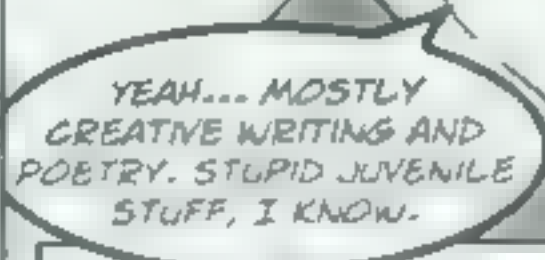


I DJ ON FRIDAY AND SATURDAY NIGHTS IN THE BALLROOM. I LIKE MUSIC THAT GETS YOU UP AND DANCING AND I LOVE TO SEE MY MUSIC MAKE PEOPLE MOVE. IT'S KINDA INSPIRING. MAKES THE REST OF THE WEEK FEEL WORTH IT.

YOU'RE A WRITER?



REALLY? IT'S SO COOL! I LOVE THAT MUSIC BECAUSE IT HELPS ME INSPIRE ME. WHENEVER I'M STUCK WITH WRITER'S BLOCK.



YEAH... MOSTLY CREATIVE WRITING AND POETRY. STUPID JUVENILE STUFF, I KNOW.



OH COME ON. I KNOW YOU DON'T REALLY LOVE THAT! I THINK IT'S PRETTY COOL. WHAT YOUR MAJOR ISN'T ENGLISH?



YEAH... WAIT, HOW DID YOU KNOW I WAS A COLLEGE STUDENT?



WELL, YOU ARE DRESSED LIKE A PREPPY LITTLE COLLEGE KID. BUT HEY, I THINK THE LOOK SUITS YOU JUST FINE, ... CUTEY.



ERMMM... HEH. I'M ACTUALLY WORKING HERE TRYING TO SAVE UP FOR COLLEGE MYSELF. THE LIFEGUARD THING MAY NOT BE THE MOST FUN JOB IN THE WORLD, BUT IT PAYS QUITE WELL, AND THE COMPANY COVERS MY LIVING EXPENSES.

SO WHY ARE YOU HERE? FUN LITTLE FAMILY VACATION?





FUN? NO... I'M HERE BECAUSE MY SISTER AND I ARE "GROWING UP TOO FAST". WE BOTH LIVE AWAY FROM HOME, NOW, AND I GUESS MY PARENTS ARE GOING THROUGH EMPTY NEST SYNDROME OR SOMETHING, BECAUSE THEY'RE ACTING LIKE THIS IS THE LAST BIG FAMILY OUTING WE'LL EVER HAVE. MY SISTER BROUGHT HER BOYFRIEND ALONG WITH HER, THOUGH, AND THEY'RE ALWAYS GOING OFF AND DOING THEIR OWN THING EVERY DAY. I MEAN, I GUESS I SEE WHERE MY PARENTS ARE COMING FROM, AND ALL, BUT IT'S JUST... REALLY NOT FUN FOR ME HERE



OH, ELLIOT, ELLIOT, THAT WILL JUST NOT DO. YOU'RE ON A VACATION. YOU SHOULD BE HAVING FUN. COME HANG WITH ME TONIGHT AND I'LL SHOW YOU HOW MUCH FUN THIS CRUISE CAN BE.



WHAT DO YAH SAY, BUDDY?

WELL... I...

GOT OTHER PLANS?



OKAY. SURE, WHY NOT?

GREAT! ARE YOU HUNGRY AT ALL?

STARVING!

HMM. I KNOW JUST THE PLACE. YOU'LL HAVE TO DRESS NICELY FOR IT THOUGH.





THIS IS WHERE I WAS SUPPOSED TO MEET HIM, RIGHT?



NICE VIEW HUH?
READY TO EAT?



WOW! YOU LOOK ... GREAT!
I FEEL UNDERDRESSED NOW.

NONSENSE!
YOU LOOK FANTASTIC.

MINUTES LATER



AFTER
YOU
S.R.



WHAT'RE YOU GONNA GET?



I'M NOT SURE YET.

WELL, IF YOU LIKE SEAFOOD,
THE CHARGRILLED SWORDFISH
IS EXCELLENT.

OH, OKAY, I'LL
TRY THAT.



AFTER DINNER.







HEYA TINA, THANKS FOR
SETTING UP FOR ME.



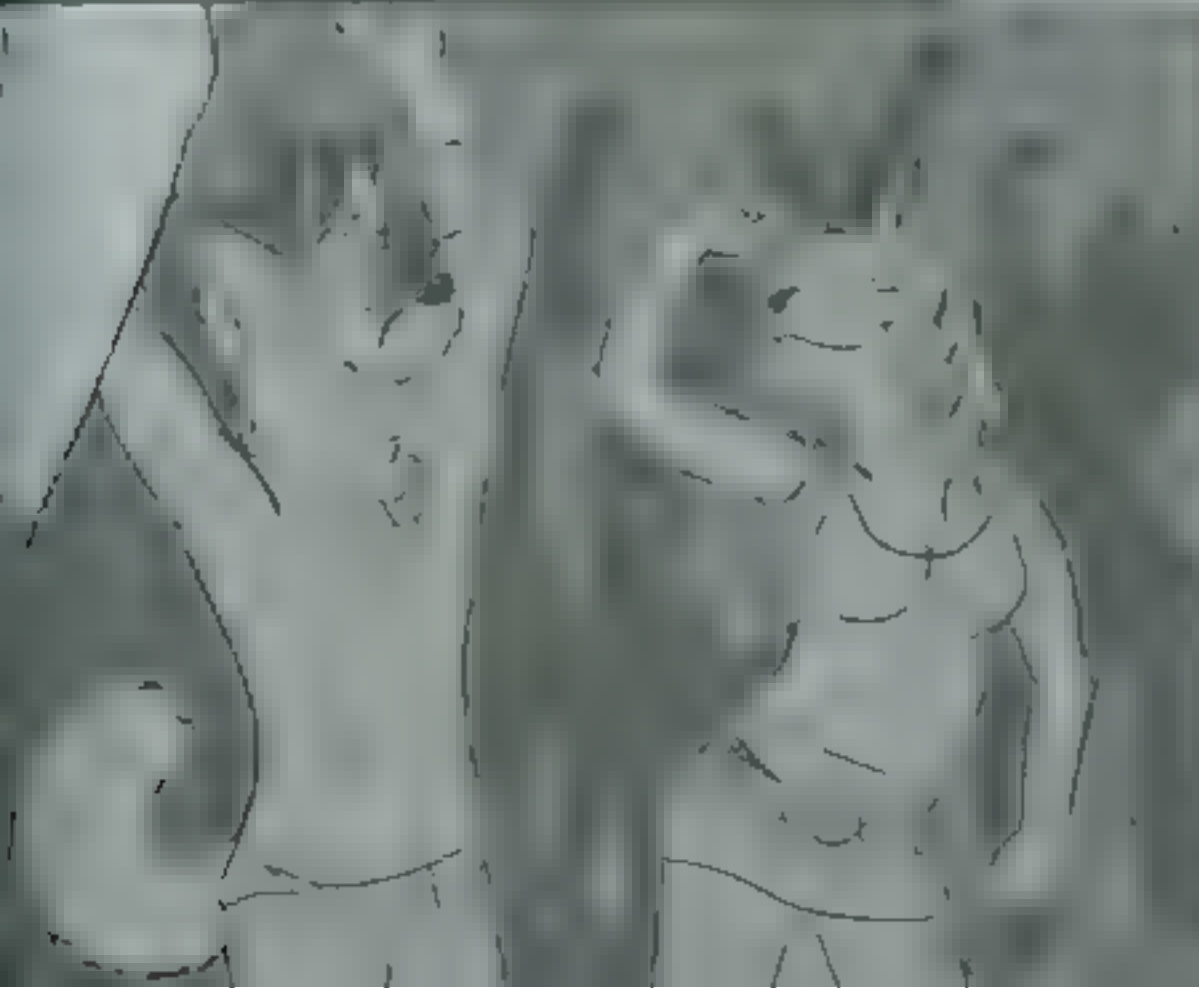
ACTUALLY I WAS TALKING TO YOUR
CUTE LITTLE FRIEND THERE.

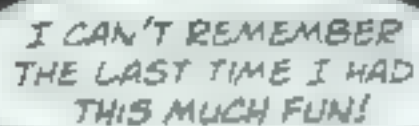


HAHA! ELLIOT - TINA,
TINA - ELLIOT

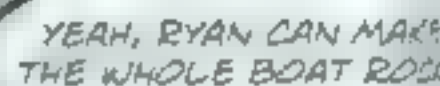


YOU'RE COMING
WITH ME MISTER.





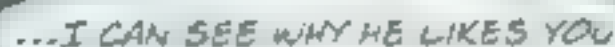
I CAN'T REMEMBER
THE LAST TIME I HAD
THIS MUCH FUN!




YEAH, RYAN CAN MAKE
THE WHOLE BOAT ROCK



YEAH... HE SURE CAN...



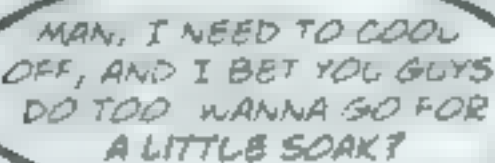
...I CAN SEE WHY HE LIKES YOU



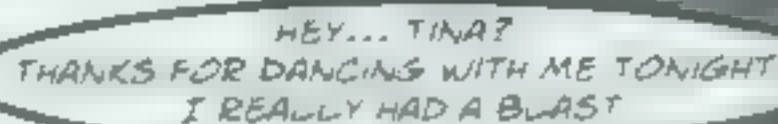
- I CAN



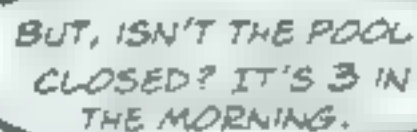
HOW WAS THAT?



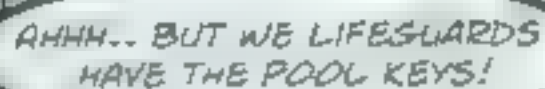
MAN, I NEED TO COOL
OFF, AND I BET YOU GUYS
DO TOO. WANNA GO FOR
A LITTLE SOAK?



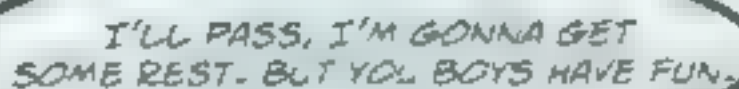
HEY... TINA?
THANKS FOR DANCING WITH ME TONIGHT
I REALLY HAD A BLAST



BUT, ISN'T THE POOL
CLOSED? IT'S 3 IN
THE MORNING.



AHHH.. BUT WE LIFEGUARDS
HAVE THE POOL KEYS!



I'LL PASS, I'M GONNA GET
SOME REST. BUT YOU BOYS HAVE FUN.



NO PROBLEM KIDDO

AN. DOESN'T THIS FEEL GREAT?

YEAH, ESPECIALLY AFTER ALL THAT DANCING.
BY THE WAY, YOU WERE BRILLIANT TONIGHT

S WERE YOU. I CAUGHT A COUPLE OF
GLIMPSES OF YOU SHAKIN' THAT TAIL.
HEHE... IT WAS CUTE.

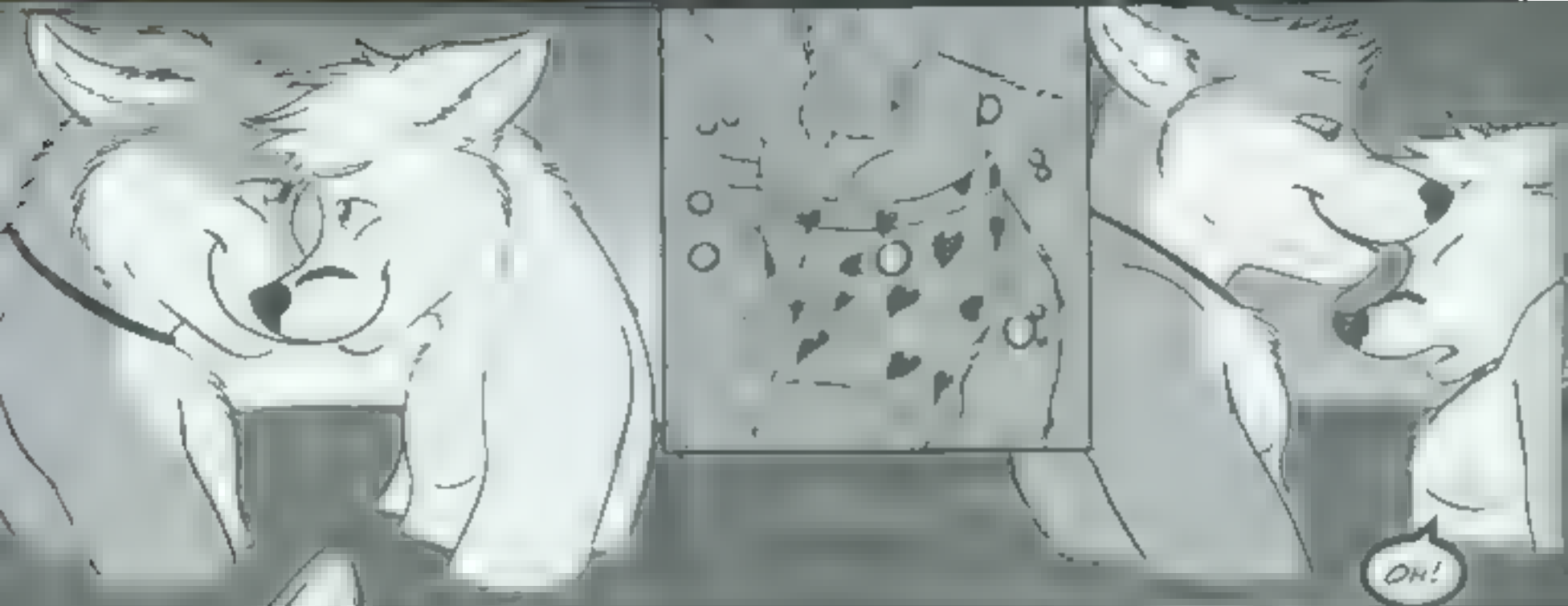
IT WAS MY PLEASURE

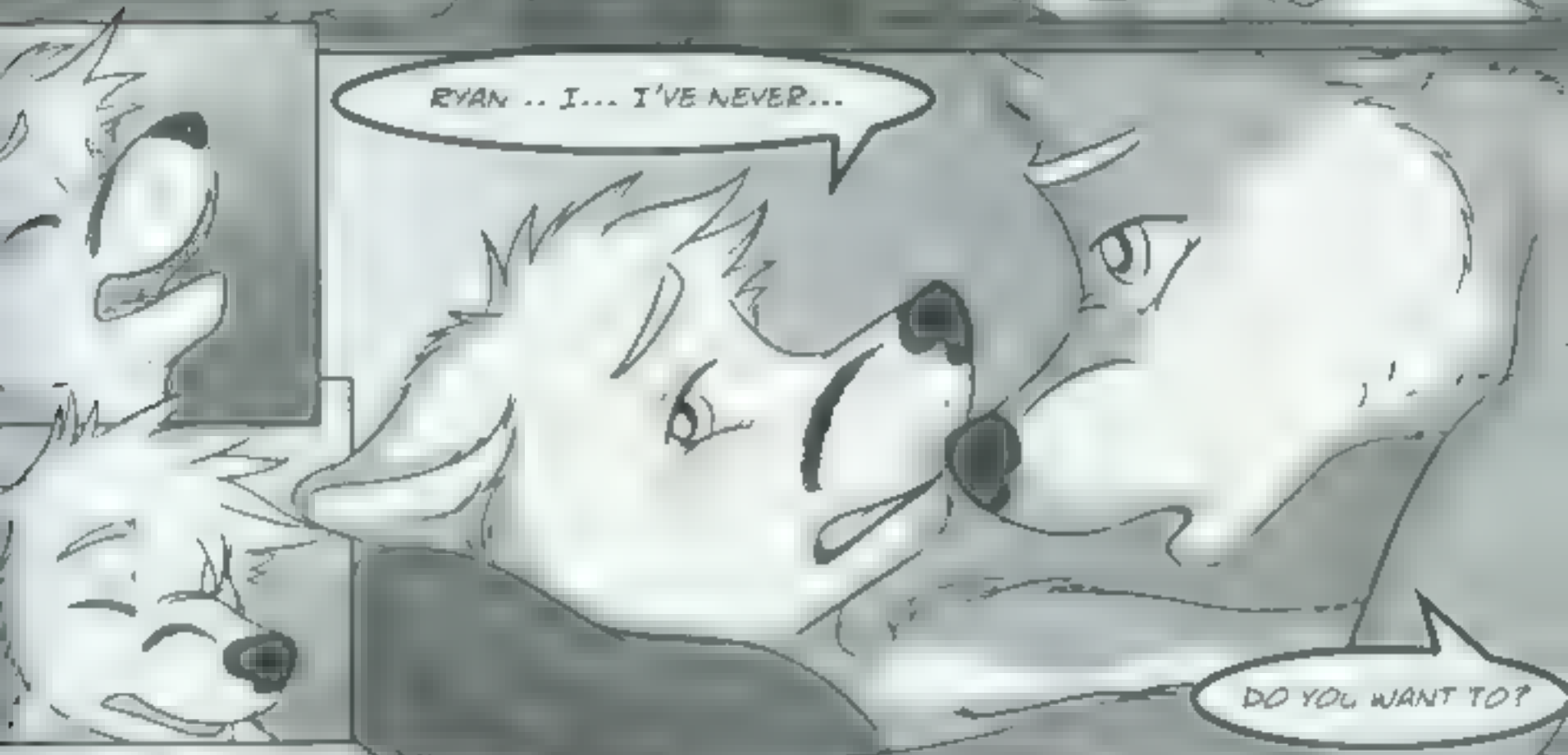
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR TONIGHT.
THIS HAS MADE MY WHOLE TRIP WORTH IT.
I... I... JUST

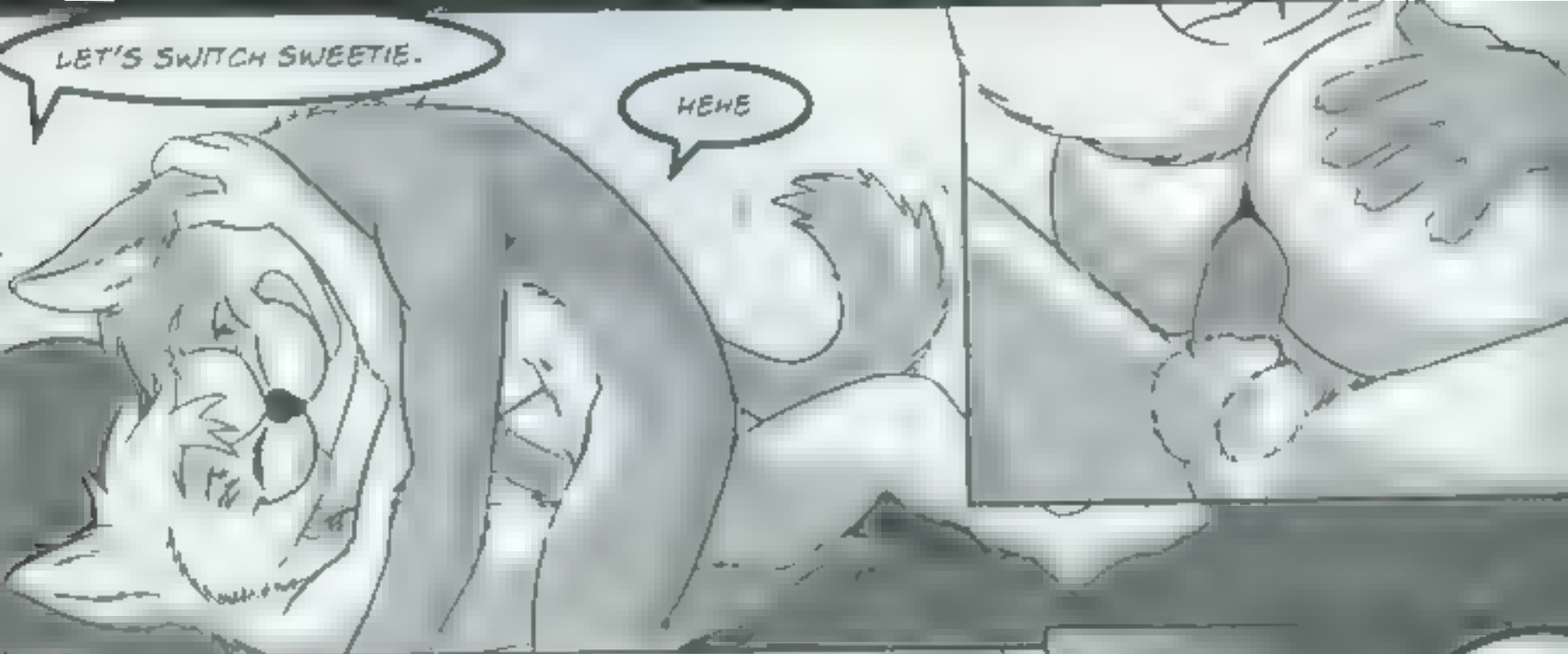
HOW DID YOU KNOW
ABOUT ME?

I DUNNO... I JUST... KIND OF GOT
THAT IMPRESSION. YOU LOOKED CUTE, AND
I JUST GOT THIS FEELING. SO I FIGURED
I'D GET TO KNOW YOU, AND...
WELL HERE WE ARE.

I'M GLAD, YOU KNOW? I MEAN,
I WASN'T EXPECTING ANY OF THIS.
I M SURPRIZED AND I'M NERVOUS
--REALLY, REALLY, NERVOUS,
BUT...
I'M REALLY GLAD I MET YOU.







ARE YOU OKAY?
... WAS I OKAY?

IT WAS WONDERFUL RYAN,
I'M JUST SCARED NOW.

SCARED OF WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
YOUR VACATION HERE IS OVER?

YEAH

SO AM I

WHAT'RE WE WASTING OUR
TIME GETTING SAD ABOUT? IT'S
NOT LIKE THIS IS THE END OF
THE WORLD OR ANYTHING.

WELL WHAT'S YOUR
ADDRESS?

...
YOU DO HAVE EMAIL
DON'T YOU?

WELL YEAH,
BUT...

... NOW, BUT STILL, I'M
REALLY GOING TO MISS YOU.

SO GIMME YOUR ADDRESS, SILLY, SO WE
CAN STAY IN TOUCH! AFTER SUMMER IS OVER,
WHEN I'M OFF THIS SHIP, AND YOU'RE BACK
AT SCHOOL, MAYBE I CAN PAY YOU A LITTLE
VISIT... IF YOU STILL WANT.





WELL, GREAT! NOW COME
ON SEXY. GET YOUR CLOTHES
ON AND LET'S GO

OF COURSE I STILL WANT!



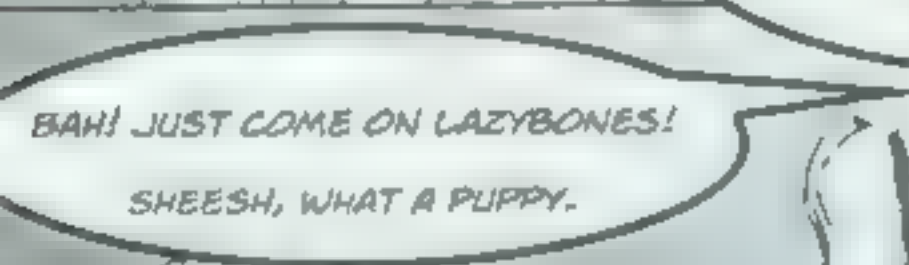
RIGHT NOW? BUT I MEAN.
WE'RE STILL KIND OF



WE CAN GET CLEANED UP
PROPERLY, AFTERWARDS.
COME ON! WE GOTTA GO, OR
WE'LL MISS IT

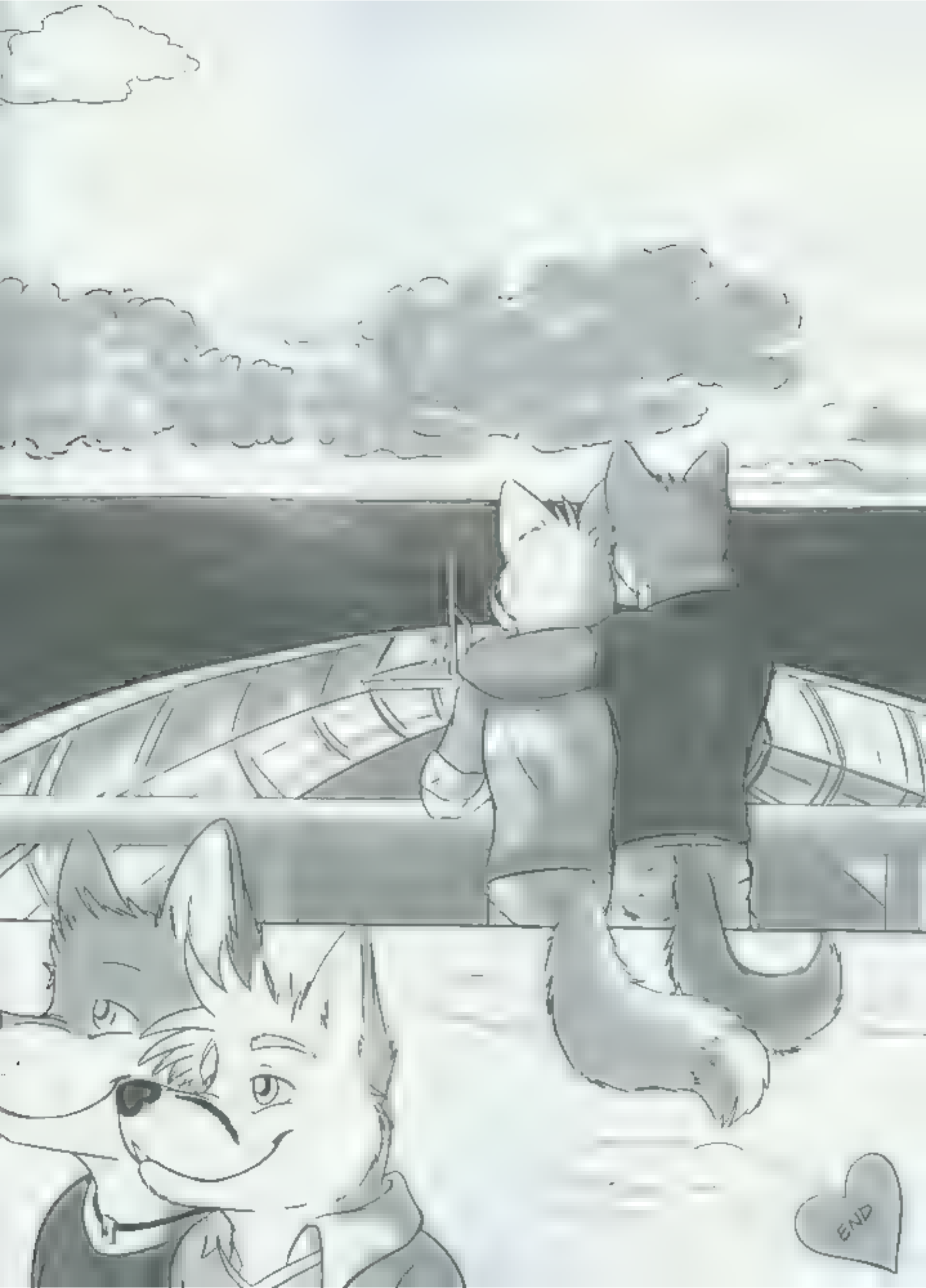


ERR .. OKAY
MISS WHA



BAH! JUST COME ON LAZYBONES!
SHEESH, WHAT A PUPPY.





**Don't
Blink**



Jake knew that training was necessary to become a top-flight superhero, so he endured it patiently. When Marcia took his training into her own paws, however, he usually attended those sessions with enthusiasm. So it felt odd, on this late spring night, to be hesitating in the doorway of her bedroom as she slipped out of her jacket and blouse.

"Well?" she said. Her long ears twitched, saled like dishes

The coyote unbuttoned one button on his shirt, then reached for the next. "Sorry, I just

"No, no." She placed a finger on the third button as the coyote was about to unbutton it. "Undress your way."

She stepped back from him, lowered her skirt to the floor and then tossed it into the hamper in the corner. Her short, fluffy tail rested against the vanity as she leaned back, folded her arms under her bra, and watched him.

He eyed the cleavage her pose created and grinned. "You got it." He concentrated, extending his arms forward for dramatic effect. He hesitated only for a moment—toward her or away?—then noticed the mirror behind her and got a better idea of his eyes as pictured himself in front of her, and when he flexed his power, he contracted the field as much as he could.

In the mirror, over her shoulder, he watched his clothes hang in the air where he'd been one second before and then fall to the floor. That never got old.

Her paws reached out for his sides, fingers sinking into his tawny pelt, her thumbs rubbing at the border where the tawny dissolved into ivory. He returned his attention to her, fitting his paws neatly around the curve of her dark brown shoulders.

"You've gotten really good at that." She reached down to his sheath, full and heavy with his swollen member, and used it to pull him forward. "C'mere, now."

"Come in handy if I ever need to strip for a supervillain," he said. "Maybe like some evil

woman I need to distract." He moved his large paws down to her small rear, shoving his fingers under her pink panties and pulling her hips against his.

Their muzzles met. Her long ears folded over to touch the tips of his. He pushed her panties further down and broke the kiss, licking up her pink nose and the gentle slope of her muzzle.

"Jake," she said in mild reproach, turning her head to the side.

His ears flicked back. She didn't let his sheath go, though, so he didn't stop pushing her panties down, crouching to finish the job. She stepped out of them and shook her head. "You canids with your tongues. Come on, onto the bed."

He licked at her exposed privates, but she stepped away from him, unhooked her bra and dropped it in the hamper. He watched her bare white breasts sway to the bed and pop down on it, bouncing with the springs. Her lithe form turned around, showing off the curves as she sat back and beckoned him with a finger. He wagged his tail and jumped up to the bed in a moment, burying his muzzle in her stomach fur.

She squealed and batted at his head, leaning back on her elbows. "Jake!"

"What?" He grinned up and applied his tongue to the pink nipples now poking through her white chest fur, trying not to get distracted by remembering what she'd told him she liked: some pulling with his teeth, licking up and down, some attention to the breast itself. Marcia wasn't the first girl he'd slept with, but she was the first he'd taken instruction from.

She stopped complaining then, and her fingers along his erection and traced them up so while he was already dripping like a leaky faucet, at her touch he moaned and pushed her down onto the bed, washing his tongue up her chest and across each nipple in turn, taking them in his teeth and teasing them gently.

She shuddered, cupping her paws around to his rear to pull him down against her. He gasped in excitement and worked his hips to rub his

hardness against her sex. He felt the moan building in her chest before he heard it, and wrapped his arms around her body while his hips worked back further until he felt the tip of his erection press down into her warm passage. "Don't forget to concentrate," she whispered.

"I know." For a moment he held there, making her wait, annoyed that she'd broken the mood, and then he pressed in slowly, all the way. She squirmed as he held her, bucking up against him, pulling his muzzle from her chest up to her mouth so her tongue could slide between his lips in a hot, wild kiss.

They kissed, while he thrust into her and back out, shivering, and that lasted a grand total of two minutes by her bedside clock until he felt the hugeness of his knot lock him to her, heard her high squeals and felt her body shake as the familiar surge of imminent release built in him—

—and suddenly he was in his own bedroom on all fours, moaning and shaking the rickety frame of his double bed as he spurted onto his sheets even though the warmth of the rabbit was gone. He panted, remaining on all fours, dripping onto his sheets, and then sighed, his ears flat. "Shit," he said to the empty room.

He blinked back to her bedroom, ears flat. She was getting under the covers, and if she saw him appear, she gave no sign.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Marcia shook her head. "You weren't concentrating up." She lay back on the pillows and looked at the ceiling.

"I tried," he said. "But if you weren't so damn hot..."

Now she looked at him. "Don't try that, Jake, it's not going to work. A real superhero has to think fast and keep his power completely under his control. You had to have felt the power building up, and you should have been able to stop it. Do we have to look at the monitor record again to see how long you had?"

He glanced at the machine in the corner and tucked his tail between his legs. "No."

She sighed. "You know this is all for your career, right, Jake?" He nodded. "Well, look. There are worse things than having to practice that some more."

When he looked up she was smiling. "I just feel like I screwed up this whole night. I really have been practicing."

"By yourself?" She arched an eyebrow and looked down at his dripping member, only now starting to retreat into its sheath.

"Well...yeah." He looked away and flicked his ears.

"That's cute. Do you think of me?"

"Oh yeah."

"Nice to know you think of me at least then." She turned onto her side.

Jake started to collect his clothes. "Sorry," he mumbled. He pulled the briefs on, then stood there awkwardly.

"You can stay if you want to." She sounded tired.

"I was going to do my rounds."

"All right." She turned out the light. Just before he blinked to the rooftop, he heard her say, "Be safe."



Marcia's condo building was not tall, but there were few tall buildings between it and downtown Dunstown, so it gave him a nice view of the suburbs and the gaslamp district, and the cracks in between where dirty things happened. He lay on the edge, eyes closed, listening to the city below. The wind ruffled the dark streak of fur down his back and tugged his tail back and forth, slowly carrying away the glow and warmth of sex.

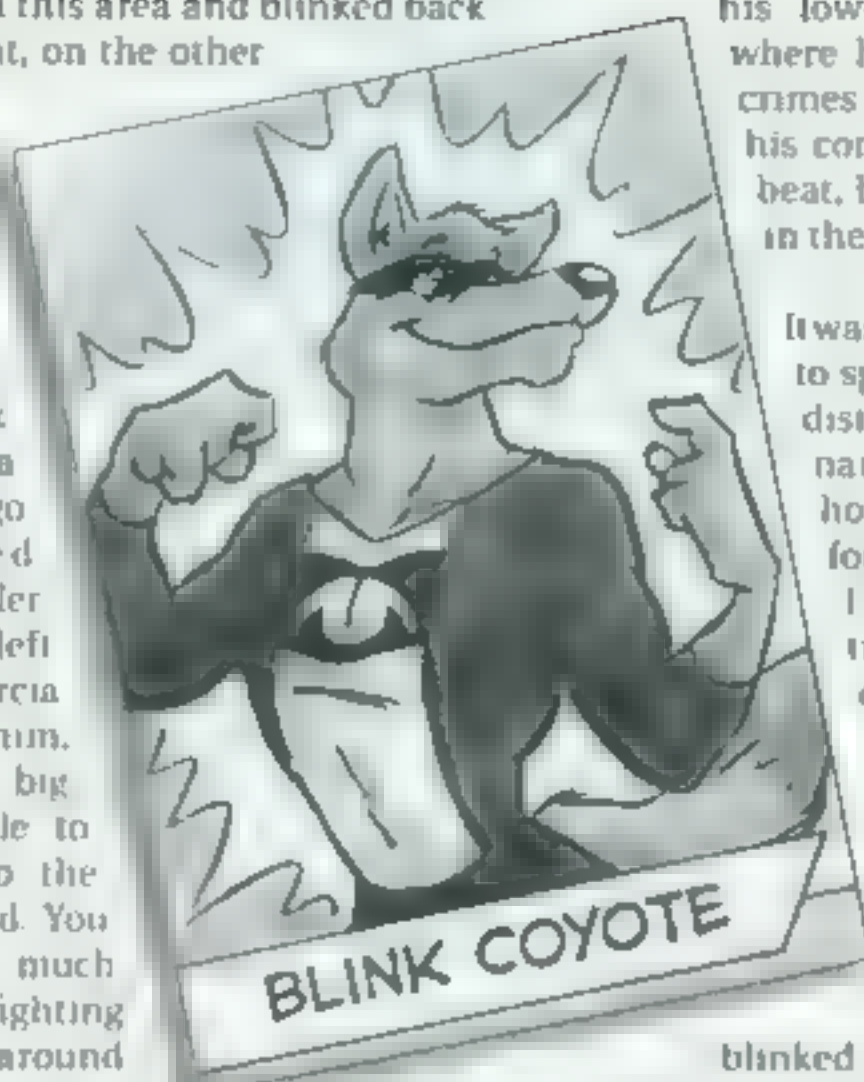
No noise reached his ears this night, and after ten minutes he was feeling a little chilly even through his fur. Even his shaft, covered by his tail and no longer straining against the fabric of his briefs, was cooling down. He took one

last look around this area and blinked back to his apartment, on the other side of town

Back in his bedroom, Jake dropped his clothes and put on his costume, a tight black jumpsuit with a yellow eye logo in the center. He'd wanted it smaller and over the left breast, but Marcia had overruled him. "It has to be big. We want people to remember it so the brand takes hold. You won't be doing much hand-to-hand fighting or sneaking around. Pop in, pop out. We'll put a kevlar sheet behind this so if people aim at it, you can survive being shot. That's what I'm most worried about. Someone taking a shot at you that you don't see

So Jake had kevlar on the front and back, a hood he could pull over his head to avoid exposing his identity if he needed to, and black gloves that had a well-textured grip, because early on he had a tendency to blink into someplace off balance and put his hands out to break his fall. He was much better now, but he still kept the gloves because he didn't know what he would be appearing next to

His portable police scanner fit into the pocket on his right hip. He seated the earbud that was connected to it into his right ear before blinking to the roof of his building, his safe spot *numero uno*. From there he could see and hear several blocks into the Swamp.



his low-rent, low-class neighborhood where he'd started breaking up small crimes when he first got his powers. As his confidence had grown, so had his beat, but he always began and ended in the Swamp.

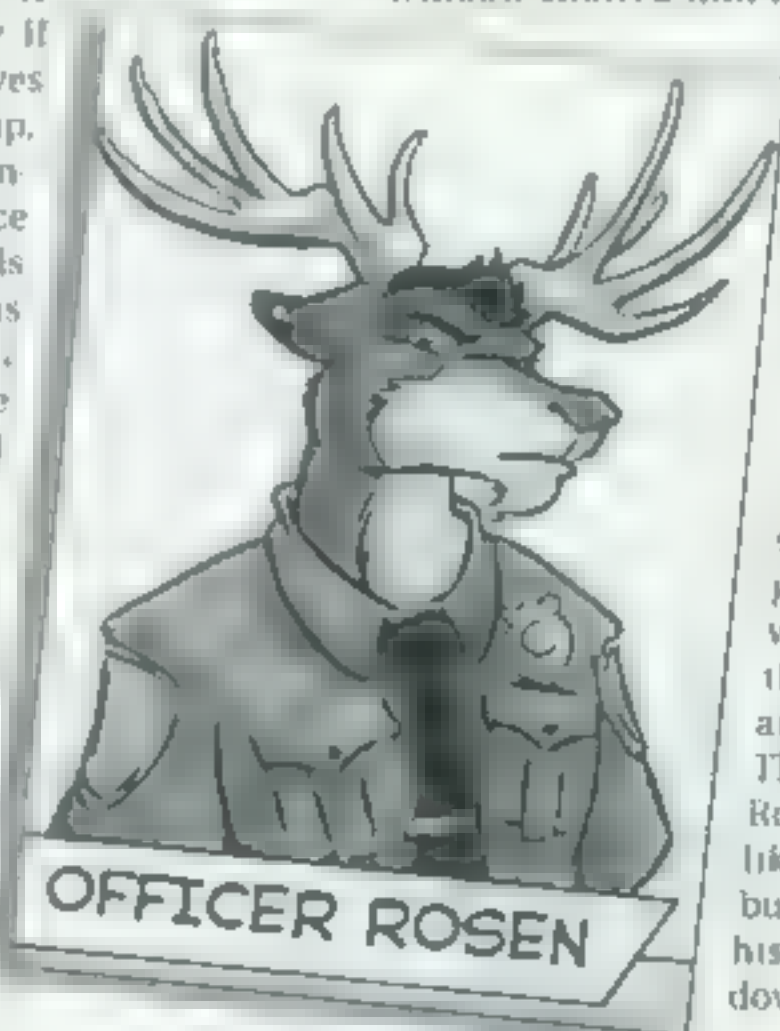
It was quiet tonight, so he blinked over to spot *numero dos*, in the financial district, Dunstown's euphemistic name for the three buildings that housed the city's largest bank and four financial services companies. There he heard some activity and turned up the volume until he caught the code 211-S *Redwood in progress*, silent alarm 221 Redwood, cross street 3rd—that was only six blocks away, a small office complex. Someone after the computers, no doubt. That happened a few times a month. He

blinked to the closest roof he could see and then the next, until he was looking down at the intersection

Jake knew that the four-story, plain brown building with schoolhouse-regular windows was older than he was, but the collection of antennas on the roof and the black wire at each window showed him that the inside had been

brought up to modern standards. He tapped his paw impatiently, itching to blink inside and find out what was going on. He hated having to wait for the police.

They pulled up ten minutes later, lights and sirens off. Two officers got out, and Jake sighed when he saw the one with the six-foot tall frame and huge rack of antlers. The presence of Officer Rosen meant he'd most likely be wasting his time, but he had to try. He put his hood up and blinked down to the street, in full



view of both the large elk and his new partner, a young fox.

The fox tapped a paw to his gut in alarm, but Rosen barely twitched. "Blinky," he said. "Wondered when we'd see you."

"Just offering my services, Officer," Jake said, keeping his ears up and staring, not reacting to the elk's condescension.

"We don't need the League butting in," Rosen said. "We've got this under control." He looked over his shoulder. "Collins, you have the building entry code?"

"I'm not here representing the League," Jake said. "When I am, I have to wear this red and blue armband, and I can only do that anyway if there are supervillains involved or if there are research laboratory thefts—"

Rosen cut him off with a wave as the fox tapped a code into the security panel. "I'm not interested in your accessorizing tips. We've got this under control. Isn't there a liquor store somewhere you should be staking out?"

"Sergeant," the fox said. "It would be helpful if he could pop in and

"Collins, just get that door open." Rosen didn't even turn, just kept Jake fixed with his eyes as though he could prevent him from blinking away. Jake glanced over at the fox, and saw a logo that looked like a circuit design and the word "Integrated" on the wall at the far end of the lobby.

The fox's ears went down. "Yes, sir."

Jake shrugged, trying not to betray his disappointment. "Just call on the radio if you need me."

"Don't hold your—"

He was on the roof before the elk finished speaking. Keeping his hood up, he sat next to the edge of the edge of the roof and rested his jaw on it. Looking over as the two police men entered the building. If there was gunfire, or if they called, he could get inside pretty quickly.

A breeze wafted past his nose, carrying a familiar avian scent. She was quiet and his hood muffled surrounding sounds, so he rarely heard her if he wasn't paying attention. She was also good about approaching him from downwind. "Hi, Moxy," he said in a low voice.

"Rosen run you off again?" A tall, stately raven settled herself a few feet in front of him, leaning her arm on the ledge in a mirror image of his pose. Her beak clacked lightly as she talked. Like most avians, she wore no clothes—as all but the best-groomed men and the elite do. She had long, thin, feathery wings and clawed talons at the ends of her skinny black legs, but when she had her arms spread out, she looked like a person in a bird suit.

"Yeah." Jake looked over at her bright black eyes. "I thought things would get better once I got in the League, but it's just gotten worse."

The raven clacked her beak and grinned at him. "You were threatened by a superhero beating in on their turf, and you thought that joining with a bunch of other superheroes would make that better?"

Jake shrugged. "I just thought, y'know, they'd see that I'm legit, that I'm not just some cocky kid out there who doesn't know what I'm doing."

"Cops have long memories. Why'd you think the cop beat at the paper turns over every year?"

"I thought it was 'cause most reporters are lightweights and once they see their first murder, they ask to be transferred to the society pages."

"Ha ha." She clacked at him again. "For your information, that was a promotion. I'm still on good terms with some of the cops."

"But not all of them."

"Do you want to trade or not?"

He grinned. "What'cha got?"

"Some info the cops aren't talking about on their scanner."

That perked his ears up. "Really? Why not?"

"Why do you think?" She fluffed her wings. "They don't want you and the League hearing about it and getting involved."

Jake couldn't stop his tail from wagging. "A supervillain? Here in Dunstown?"

"Maybe. But no, just a couple thefts from research labs specializing in supernormals."

"Which labs?"

"Tell me about your girlfriend," she countered.

He jumped. "How did you know..." Then he stopped, because her beak was open in a laugh. "Dammit, Moxy..."

"So you do have a girlfriend. That's sweet. How long you been going out? Does she know your secret identity?"

"One question," he said. "Since you already got a bit of info. She's gonna kill me anyway."

"Does she know your secret identity?"

He nodded. "Yeah." He hadn't really been able to hide it, when he'd blinked out during sex on their fourth date.

"So you trust her. Wedding bells in the future?"

"Which labs?" He was determined to hold her to one question. Moxy often dug up good information for him, and if he didn't parcel out the things she wanted to know about him, he wouldn't get far with her. She'd already asked about his family and once about the League in the four months since she'd first met him on a rooftop in the gaslamp district.

"Ling Scientific and the Mount Cedar government lab. The cops are really worried about the Mount Cedar one because it had state-of-the-art locks. They think it might be a new gadgethead."

"Cripes, not another one. You know the League has a list of about a hundred of them?"

"I've heard." She cocked her head as he took out his handheld phone and started jotting notes. "You're just going to send that unsecured?"

"Oh, CryptoFox does all kinds of security on it," he said, tapping a quick message.

"Yeah, but if I pick that up, or knock you out and take it, I could just read it from there."

He grinned and tossed it to her. "Go for it."

It clattered to the roof as she swiped and missed, unprepared. She picked it up and stared at him, then down at the handheld. Her black eyes blinked, and she looked back up. "It won't turn on."

"Thumbprint reader on the side, keyed to me. I have to be holding it for it to be on."

"What if I sever your thumb?"

He shuddered. "Come on, Moxy."

She tossed the device back to him. "Hey, you have to think like a supervillain."

"Well, it has to stay warm. And I think it checks for a pulse too." He applied his thumb to the pad and watched the screen light up.

"Okay," she said. "So I just have to tie your paw to it and keep you in restraints."

He grinned. "You seen a restraint that could hold me?"

"If a gadgethead that's built to break 'em to build Mount Cedar had a lab devoted to power negation."

"What?"

"You think the government likes the idea of you guys running around?"

"The League has a government contract..."

"Wake up, Bunk," she said, now sounding cross. "The government defaults on contracts every day. You expect them to rely on the mate honor of anyone else? They expect in others what they would expect from themselves. They just want

a way to control you guys in case...in case they need to."

"But why here? Why not in New York, or L.A.?"

"In the big two's backyards? Nah. Dunstons was a good, medium-sized town with out a superhero until a couple years ago." She laughed again, a breathy ah-ah-ah sound. "The radiation burst you got your powers from was a malfunction in a machine headed for Mount Cedar, remember? Heh ironic, eh?"

"I guess, I don't really go for irony."

"To each his own." She grinned. "This'll make for a good couple articles. 'Ms. Blink,' I think we'll call her. Probably a coyote, right? No, wait, cubs would be a big liability for you. So probably not a coyote." She tapped the ledge. "Probably not a canid. Oh well. I'll make up a few likely candidates and profile them. Should get me through the month. Hey, look. Your cops missed the guy."

Sure enough, Rosen and Collins were coming out of the entrance of the building alone. They got in the car, and Jake turned up his scanner in time to hear Rosen's gruff voice saying, "...no suspects found at the scene. Security company rep arrived and reset the alarm."

He turned the scanner down. "Did you see a truck from the security company pull up?"

"Yeah." Moxy pointed down to where the police car was driving away. "It's around the corner from here. There goes the guy." A bear in a dark uniform was tapping a code at the security panel and then walked off and out of view.

Jake watched him go, then looked back up at the building. No goggles thickered behind any of the windows, no flashlight appeared now that the police and security were gone. Still ..

"Don't go in." Moxy said, watching him.

Jake didn't take his eyes from the windows. "It just doesn't feel right."

"Alarms go off sometimes," she said. "But look, you go in there now and the best thing that can happen is you don't find anything, nobody sees you, and you come back here to this spot. So let's just pretend you've already done that and move on."

"What about truth and justice," he said, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

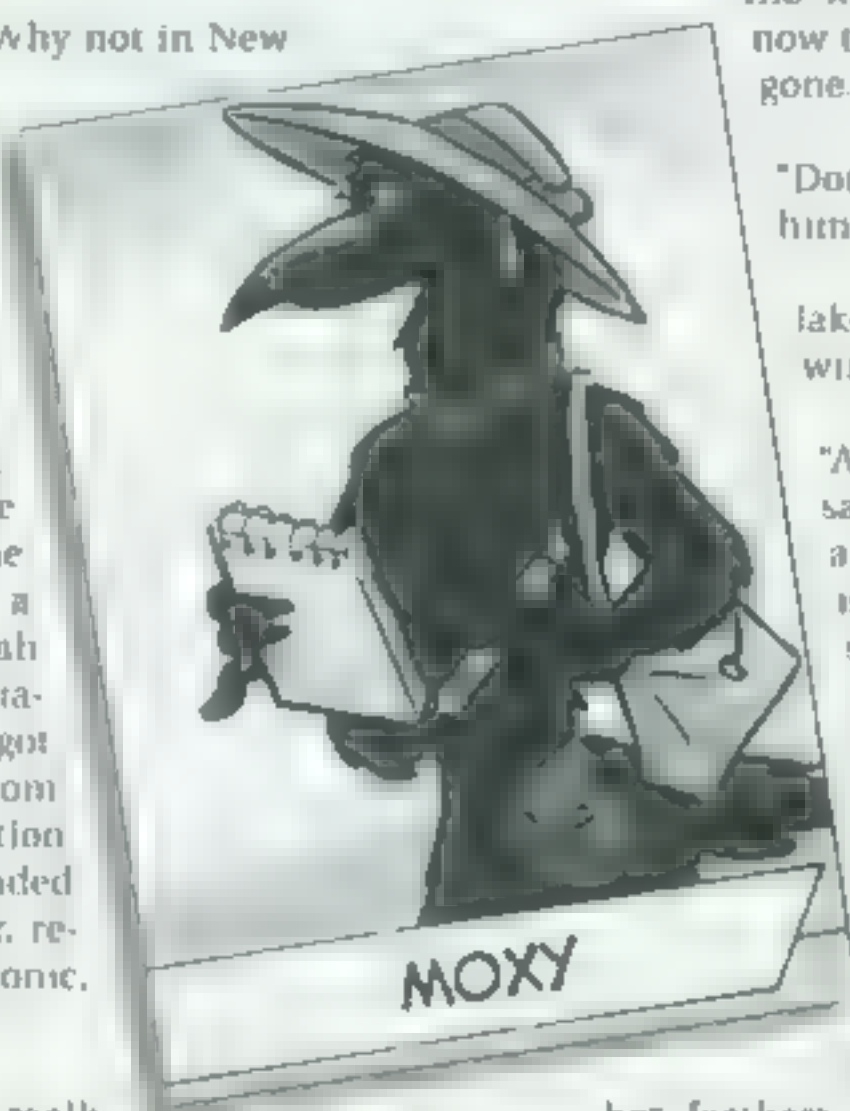
What about it? She rustled her feathers. "Sorry, kiddo. You get caught snooping around in there, you're breaking the law. You catch a thief after the cops have already been here, you're making things worse. Just move on. Keep an ear to the scanner, and don't worry. You're a good kid and you'll get a break eventually."

Jake sighed and forced himself to look away from the building, working his paws against the frustration building up inside him. A few mistakes he'd made in the past couple years as an overzealous kid, and suddenly the cops wouldn't let him help with anything. And the League gave him nothing but petty assignments and food duty. "I sure hope so," he said sourly.

"I'll see to it," Moxy said, standing and stretching her wings. "After all, someone's got to be your Lois Lane, right?"

"You're first in line." He waved as she leaped from the roof, spreading her wings and sailing down over the street.

Sometimes he wished he could fly, more for the experience than anything else. He liked being



Red laughed. He leaned closer. "I'm not allowed to talk about it around Vicious Vixen, but I just can't keep weight on. Anything I eat vanishes quicker'n a chicken leg at my mom's Sunday dinner."

"I'm kinda the same," Jake said.

"You could just blink off the extra weight, couldn't you?" Red cocked his head.

"Eww." Jake shook off the vision of a pile of fat lying on the ground. "I dunno, never tried."

"Crypto reckons you could. He's pretty excited about seein' the range of your powers."

"Really?" Jake looked across the table at the scruffy fox, lost in his laptop computer. "He hasn't given me anything to do. I wonder if he ever will."

Red rubbed his chin again. "Hold on just a tick." He patted the coyote on the shoulder and then navigated through the chairs and heroes to Crypto's side. The smaller fox jumped when Red tapped his shoulder, then perked his ears, looked over at Jake as Red talked, and finally nodded. Red looked up and gave Jake a thumbs-up.

"I swapped with you," he said a moment later, strolling back to Jake's side. "P.K.'s investigating the Mount Cedar research item you brought in, and Crypto'd assigned me as backup, but I convinced him to switch with you. I'll do that cleanup over in Millenport for ya."

"P.K.?"

"Psycho Coyote. Sorry, Power Coyote."

Jake stifled a giggle, looking over at the tall coyote engaged in conversation with Vicious Vixen, three pens twirling lazily in the air above his paws. "Psycho?"

"Psycho-kinetic. But also, yeah, that." Red grinned. "Wait 'til the barbecue. Watch him try to pick out a fork. The tines all have to be exactly the same length. He's an okay guy, though. Just be flexible with your schedule."

Jake found out what he meant after the meeting, when P.K. came over to work out the schedule. The floating pens in front of the jarring red on black patterned uniform distracted Jake, so he had a little trouble following the conversation.

"I'm sorry, we can't meet there at noon?"

The pens twirled more quickly. Jake had to look away. "I have to eat lunch at 12:45 p.m.," P.K. said. "And I have to eat dinner at seven. So we'll have to leave the labs at five."

"I could just blink you home."

One of the pens nearly fell. "Oh, no no no. I can't do that. No, my private jet will be fine. We just need to be done by five so I can get home."

Jake caught the eye of Red Lightning, who was grinning at him over MultiWolf's shoulder. "Okay. If we meet at three, will that work?"

The pens froze in the air for a moment. P.K.'s eyes seemed to unfocus. "Three is bad," he said. "It has a bad resonance on that day." He focused on Jake again, as the pens started moving. "Three-thirty?"

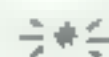
"Two-thirty would give us more time," Jake watched the pens' reaction to that. They kept twirling calmly.

"All right," P.K. nodded. "Two-thirty it is. Meet out in front of the labs? I'll have Jamal call someone there to set up an appointment. The idea is to pick up reference points for us to come back that night and investigate further if need be."

"Got it," Jake grinned.

P.K. peered behind him. "I hope you don't wag your tail that much all the time," he said. "It's quite distracting."

"Sorry," Jake stilled it, but when P.K. turned away, he gave Red a thumbs-up and a huge grin.



His first real assignment had Jake excited enough that when he blinked into Marcia's

place that I forgot and saw her holding the Herald society page, he had completely forgotten about Moxy's article. "Guess what?" he said, bouncing from foot to foot. "I've got an assignment, a real one, with P.K. next week! I can't tell you what it is 'til it's over, official League business, but it's—what?"

Marcia held up the paper, open to a page two article titled "Local Hero Has Romantic Side." Beneath one of the stock photos of him, Moxy had drawn a generic, wily cat's face with a large chest and a white question mark inside it. "Oh," Jake said. "That."

"Let's see," Marcia said. "I could be Genevieve Hightower, the kangaroo heiress to the Hightower fortune—classy, her internet sex video must be losing steam—or I could be Janice Mungolas, high-powered criminal attorney—met her once or twice, she needs that long neck for looking down on people, plus she has no fashion sense—or I could be Adrienne Bazure, that slut of a lioness over at Macy's—and why do they have you linked to all these exotic women anyway? Oh, and listen to this: 'Rumors linking Jake Kovac to the Herald's own Moxy Nightwing are most certainly untrue. A most certainly.' She snorted. "Considering she just made them up, I'm sure they are. Aren't they?"

It took Jake a second to realize she was talking to him. "Oh, Oh, yes, of course! I mean, I couldn't tell her anything about you, but she tricked me into telling her that I have a girlfriend."

"I know," Marcia sighed. "It's just frustrating, doing all this work and being so half-part of your career and not being able to take any credit for it. You know, yesterday, if the girls at work were talking about that carjacking."

"They were?" Jake's ears perked up. "What did they say?"

"Oh, the usual." Marcia splayed her long ears and clasped her paws under her chin. "He's so brave. I bet he's really handsome under that hood, and so mysterious!"

"Was that that cute, um, what's her name, Crystal?" Marcia's eyes narrowed, and Jake flattened his ears, dropping the look of interest. "Sorry, sorry. So, uh, where are we going tonight?"

"Bertolucci's. My treat."

Jake wagged his tail as Marcia dropped the newspaper. "Is this my birthday dinner?"

"No, no." She smiled. "You get your birthday dinner next week on your birthday. I've got something special planned. No, this is just a dinner. Then I thought maybe we'd come back here and work on your concentration."

"Oh, if we have to." His tail wagged even faster.

She grinned. "Like I have to ask. Come on, stud. I'll drive."

That was their standing joke. Jake had a car, for appearances, but for a while he preferred to walk or blink anywhere he went. He could get lost, he could get lost, or get back to places he'd been, and having grown up in Dunstown meant he could get lost somewhere in the city within five minutes at most.

They were walking down to the car when his handbag drew out a text. He didn't skim read the messages while Marcia sighed dutifully. "On for..." He tapped a message back. "Hang on, I can't believe these guys have never heard of Justin Timberwolf...I can't believe they don't know who sings 'Howl of My Heart.' Crypto really needs to go home and get better. He'll be off tonight. Okay, there." He tapped the device and grinned at her. "Dinner?"

They had just gotten their drinks when the handheld buzzed again. Marcia glared at it. "What now?"

Jake's claw moved over the screen, writing in quicks north and as he typed absently. Another check up. They're worried about Dr. Malevola escaping from his cell, and they want me to pop in at random intervals."

"Can't they wait until after dinner?"

"Crypto says that might constitute a predictable pattern." He looked up, putting the device down on the table. "I'll be right back. Sorry."

"Jake, listen, don't—"

He didn't hear the end of her sentence. When he blinked back, she was sipping her beer. The lines of annoyance above her eyes smoothed out as she saw him. That was one thing Jake was learning to appreciate about his ability: the chance to see people candidly in the moment before they registered his presence. He made a note to be nicer to Marcia for the rest of the night.

"Dr. Malevola all safe and sound?"

"Yeah, he was, uh, well, kinda embarrassed to see me," Jake grinned. "I think someone's been sneaking him dirty magazines."

The rabbit shook her head. "You shouldn't do that, darling. The waiter could've come over."

Jake shrugged. "No bigger Eds than a mug graph or two and we'd get the meal comped." He slid the handheld into the pocket of the yellow dress shirt he wore.

The rabbit arched an eyebrow. "That's never happened."

Jake looked off towards the bar. "I got a free salad once after I stopped a guy from robbing the Sizzler."

"But you did that in costume."

"Marcia, I'm fine, really." The handheld in his pocket buzzed again, and he took it out and started tapping on it.

The rabbit looked over the table. "Another follow-up?"

"Nah, P.K.'s asking me if I can take care of the pot roast for the barbecue this weekend. He was supposed to, but I'm the new kid, so they're dumping it on the staff. They don't want to do on me. I don't want to, already asked, I could get the chips for him. I'm like, how long will it take you to run to the store? A minute?" He grinned and waved his paw.

"Oh." Marcia leaned back in the booth. "I didn't know we were going to a barbecue this weekend."

Jake's ears went back. He looked up at her and then back at the handheld. "Oh, I, uh, didn't think you'd want to go."

Marcia folded her arms across her dark blue jacket. "What made you think that? All the times I asked if I could meet some of the other League members? The strings I pulled to get you an interview to get into the League in the first place? The huge poster of WonderWolf I used to have in my college dorm?"

"I never saw your college dorm."

"First the publicist position, now this."

"It's just a boring function. I don't know if anyone else is bringing their, uh, SOs..."

"Of course they are," she snapped back at him, and then softened her voice, giving him a smile. "But most of them aren't single. You just have to be more assertive."

"I just feel like I have a long way to go," Jake said after a moment. "I've only been doing this for two years. They've all got these great stories they swap. And my name..."

"What's wrong with your name?" Marcia narrowed her eyes.

"Blink Coyote? It sounds like I have some kind of neurological condition."

"We picked that name out together." Marcia's tone was growing frostier.

"You picked it. Anyway, I don't even have a nemesis yet."

"Oh, not this again." Marcia rolled her eyes. "Forgive my prosaic spirit, but I'm glad you don't have one of those."

"But I should! I'm the only big hero in Duinstown. The only one in the League, anyway. WonderWolf has at least three." Jake tapped the table. "I wonder if he'd give me one if I asked."

The waiter returned then with their pizza. Jake took one of the pepperoni and sausage slices and ripped a huge bite out of it while Marcia nibbled on the green pepper and onion side.

"You've got a lot to be proud of," she said after a bit. "In my state, it's down thirty percent since you started working the streets."

"I know," he said, "but it's all purse-snatchers and liquor-store holdups. Nothing really big. You hear? Last Night Wolf captured three terrorists and half a pound of weapons-grade plutonium last week?"

Marcia blinked. "No."

"I guess Stormy was going to release the news tomorrow. Yeah, he just got back from Kurdistan and he was in D.C. with the CIA all day yesterday and today."

"Stormy? Is that Coyote Rain?"

Jake finished his slice of pizza. "Nah. Stormy's the...uh..." He grabbed another slice and chewed on it, his ears back.

Marcia put down her pizza. "Oh. So that's his name."

"Her name."

"Cute. Sounds like she really fits in. Is she a wolf? Coyote?"

He chewed on the pizza, searching for an answer that wouldn't prolong the conversation. "Um. Wolf, I think."

"You *think*?"

"I only met her the one time. WonderWolf was introducing her and it was real quick, but yeah, she's a wolf."

"Of course she is. The League of Canids at the Canids couldn't hire a rabbit publicist. Did you see the press release—last week got picked up by two of the major networks?"

Jake started to shake his head, then caught himself. "Oh, yeah!"

"If I'm not fighting crime, I don't have to be a canid, right?"

"Yeah, but everyone else is."

"That's discrimination."

Jake sighed. "I did try to tell them... but I'm just a kid, you know, and I'm new..."

The rabbit picked up her pizza. "It's all right. I'm probably not qualified. It would have been nice to have been asked, is all." She paused, then visibly put her aside and chirped cheerfully. "I'm glad to hear things are going well there."

Jake took another slice of pizza and munched it slowly. Her distress and their disagreements melted or vaguely uneasy each other into a cloud in their sky, a storm postponed until later.

They walked along the tree-lined streets back to her condo, a second-floor unit in an upscale complex just a few blocks from the Dunstons' gated-up district. The conversation they'd begun way back was bland and neutral, friends of their getting tips, people at Marissa's getting promoted, government initiatives. Nothing to add to the story, nothing to dispel it.

Jake felt the tension, or at least thought he did. Best to cut his losses tonight and start fresh tomorrow, or even wait 'til his birthday, he thought. They reached her building, and she was waiting expectantly, so he said, "I'm kind of tired."

She tugged on his jacket. "You need to keep practicing."

He sighed. "Mmm. I really am kind of tired..."

She nuzzled up at the base of his ears and then a bit inside. His ears flicked. He was getting excited, and he could smell that she was too. She angled her hip into his arms and sighed against him. "Why don't you stay the night and tuck me in?"

He gave in, of course; he was young and male. What else could he do?

At least he would do his best to enjoy it. And when this one had managed to hold on for this climax, he still blinked out in mid-convulsion, returning contritely to Marcia's remonstrations. A home of his own he'd Jake thought he

would rest for just a little while before making his rounds, but when he yawned and cracked his eyes open, the sun greeted him through the bedroom window

Guilt over missing his rounds drove him to check the Internet and the paper for any crimes he might have prevented, and finding none helped only a little. He worked assiduously the next few nights, meeting Moxy once but getting no new information from her.

Marcia was unaccountably busy the entire weekend, leaving him messages with instructions to come to her place on Tuesday night at 6 pm. Making his birthday present, he presumed, with some relief, as it freed him from having to explain that he was going to meet Red Lightning for Sunday brunch without her.

Red's wife was a charming vixen, a little older than Red, and she told him they'd been married out of high school, since before the lab accident that had given Red his powers. He told Jake about that over beers (Red drank only one, saying "I'm a lightweight" with a grin), and Jake told him the story of discovering his power, the radiation burst from the machine he was unloading from a truck at his summer job. Jake envied the rapport Red seemed to have with his wife, how they each knew each other's stories and kept taking small moments to look at each other or touch each other. They were so likable, however, and laughed so genuinely at his stories, that he couldn't let envy grow into anything else.

Their real names were Mike and Sarah, and as they were shaking hands, Mike said, "Well, now that you've been here I guess you can get back anytime, eh?"

"Just to the front porch," Jake grinned. "I never blink in uninvited."

Sarah smiled hesitantly. "Could I...see?"

Mike grinned at Jake. He pointed to a tree in the front yard. "Race you to the tree and back?"

"Oh, I don't know," Jake said. "I don't usually..."

"Come on. Don't worry about beating me."

"No, it's just..." They were both looking at him. "Okay."

"Give us a start, hon," Mike said.

Sarah held up her black paw. "Ready, steady, go!"



Jake appeared next to the tree and touched it just as a red blur slapped a black paw to the bark. He got his bearings and reappeared inside next to Sarah, a fraction of a second after Mike had skidded to a halt.

"I think Mike won," Sarah said. "But you did a very nice job."

"Of course you would say that," Jake grinned as he said it.

"Home court advantage!" Mike crowed, raising both paws in the air.

"Now let's try it with the door closed," Jake said, and they all laughed. "All right, I gotta get going. Thanks again for the great brunch, Sarah."

"Lovely to meet you," Sarah said, extending her paw.

"Likewise," he said, taking it gently. "You're a lucky guy, Mike."

"Oh, I dunno," he said. "I heard you're dating Jenny Hightower." He winked as Jake's ears flicked back in a blush.

"Stop it, Mike," Sarah said.

"Yeah, don't worry, you won't see me on the Internet anytime soon." Jake grinned. "So long, guys."

He blinked back to his apartment and spent the rest of the day doing mundane tasks, laundry, some housecleaning, grocery shopping. His mom called just before sunset to wish him a happy birthday in advance, and after an hour talking to both parents the city was growing dark and he could go out on his rounds.

On Tuesday, he was woken up at quarter past seven by a phone call from his sister in Europe wishing him a happy birthday. He talked to her while he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, went in to work, and found himself growing more and more excited as the clock inched towards six.

At 5:57 pm, unable to wait any longer, he blinked to Marcia's apartment. "Birthday boy's here!" he announced, dropping to the living room carpet.

Soft music played from the bedroom. Otherwise, the apartment was silent. Jake straightened his shirt with a grin. "Oh, some concentration lessons? Well, I'm all for that." He pushed open the door to the bedroom.

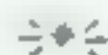
Marcia sat on the bed. It took him a moment to see that her arms were tied behind her back and her mouth bound securely with tape. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and she motioned him back with her head, straining to talk through the tape.

He heard a small noise to his right and felt a prick in his side. In an instant, he was back in his bedroom, landing on a steamy, hot bed and falling to the floor. Dizzy, he got up and braced himself. He'd been shot with...something. And Marcia was caught.

He yawned, eyes started when he saw the open closet. Had to get his suit on and go back and rescue her, he thought. He fumbled for a moment with the buttons on his shirt, wondering why his fingers seemed thicker. "Hell," he said, and blinked out of his clothes, appearing naked in front of the closet and already reaching for the outfit.

He got both legs in it and then his arms, fastening the straps up the side and pulling the hood over his ears. The room was spinning slowly. He pulled the gloves on. Had to save Marcia. Had to...

He blinked to her bedroom, intending to pop in, assess the situation, and pop out, like he'd done with the car thief. But he materialized a good two feet above the edge of her bed, landed awkwardly, and fell to the floor after getting only a glimpse of a white robe against a light-colored wall. Hands circled his neck as he struggled to keep his balance in the room, which was now not only spinning, but crazily tilted. He tried unsuccessfully to blink out twice before blackness rose up and swallowed him.



Awareness came back to him in a reddish haze on the inside of his eyelids. His mouth felt gummy and tasted horrible. He ran his tongue around his dry lips and tried to open his eyes, but they felt gummy as well. He couldn't bring his paws up; they were numb and burning. His neck, wrist, ankle hurt, too. The room he was in smelled sterile and antiseptic, but there was a person in it with him. Male, some kind of scientist or doctor, he thought. He could smell laboratory chemicals and the person's scent under it, a light musk, like raccoon, but different.

He forced his eyes open, letting in a bright white light that made him close them immediately. After several blinks, tears dripping down his muzzle, he was able to see the blurry outlines of what was in the room with him.

Directly in front of him was some kind of lab bench, with two metal stools in front of it and a shiny metal contraption, probably a faucet. He could see a yellowish rectangular object to his right, a box or a filing cabinet shape, and beside it a long flat thing that looked like a rough another filing cabinet had exploded on top of it, showering papers and folders everywhere.

His vision cleared somewhat as he looked over to his left, and saw the figure in white.

It stood just a bit shorter than him, and not only was its lab coat white, but most of the fur he could see was white. Only a grayish patch

between the two small pinkish ears matted the otherwise ivory fur. Behind him, a thick and furless pink tail curled up from the ground, and Jake could see his feet, covered in shoes. The dark brown eyes behind a pair of round glasses held his when he met them, and the long pointed muzzle below them curved into a smile, showing a mouth full of small, pointed teeth. A possum. Jake had never met a possum before.

First time for everything, he thought, trying to clear his head. He'd find out what the story was, blink out of his bonds and subdue this guy, and then go rescue Marcia.

"Welcome to my laboratory, Blink Coyote. Or may I call you Jake?" The possum had a deceptively pleasant voice, with a bit of a quaver to it. Jake cursed inwardly. His secret identity was out, less than two years into his career! It had taken WonderWolf thirteen to be found out.

"Jake, then," the possum went on. "I'm sure you're wondering what you're doing here. I've been working on some projects involving you and your fellow supernormals, and I reached a point in my work where it became necessary to prove a hypothesis before I could proceed any further. I required the presence of an actual supernormal in order to conduct a series of controlled tests, with myself as the control subject, to follow proper scientific method..." He blinked, looked around, and cleared his throat. "That is to say, I have been indulging in some extra research of my own, that my employer is not aware of. For my own benefit. With your power at my disposal, I will build a weapon that will make governments tremble!"

Jake ignored the odd discontinuity of this exposition. "Who are you?" he croaked, and then immediately thought of a hundred better things to say. Why not, "you have the advantage of me, sir"? Or, "you seem to know me, but I'm afraid I'm not familiar with you"? Or even the classic, "you're mad!"? But no, he had to come up with the most trite line ever, and deliver it badly on top of that.

"You will be the first to know me as Doctor..." He hesitated. "Doctor Defiance."

Jake frowned. "What are you defying?"

The possum blinked at him. "Um, authority. Governments! You know."

"It's not a very good name. I suggest you keep trying." That was better.

"Listen...you're not in a position to discuss this!" Doctor Defiance was clearly as uncomfortable with his name as Jake was with his, if not more. "We'll have plenty of time to compare names."

"Where's Marcia?" Jake demanded.

"Oh, she's down the hall. After she saw me, I had to bring her along. She'll be extra insurance to make sure you behave."

Fleetinglly, Jake wondered how the possum had gotten them both to this lab. Must have henchmen, of course, so there'll be someone guarding Marcia. I'll be ready for them. He flexed his fists. "This has all been very interesting, but I think it's time for me to go." He closed his eyes and blinked...

...and opened them again to see the possum sneer. "Go on, then," Doctor Defiance said.

Jake felt something rebrighten inside. He missed a rising panic on the way down, a feeling he remembered last from looking up two years ago and seeing the red glow even through the wood of the crate as he balanced it on his shoulder. He tried again, and again went nowhere.

"Not so easy, is it?" The possum clapped his paws. "It looks like my first hypothesis is proven correct! The collar works!"

"Collar?" Jake had been too distracted to notice it constricting the fur around his neck. If he swiveled his ears downward, he could hear a very faint, high-pitched electronic whine.

"Yes, my hypothesis about the mechanism of your powers was accurate. Once I had figured that out, it was child's play to create a blocker."

This was not heading in a direction Jake was happy with. "How did you..."

The possum waved a paw. "Oh, it's a simple matter of working out the displacement factor

and the transference energy. After that, there's enough supernormal research to narrow it down. But perhaps I'm being a little modest. It did take me six months, after all." He had a small laugh behind his paw.

Jake felt his tail droop. Six months? This guy had come up with a way to negate his powers in six months? His career was over anyway. It didn't really matter if some idiot with a stupid name was going to keep him captive to do experiments on. If it wasn't this jerk, it'd be some other one.

No! He was a member of the League of Crime-fighting Canids, after all!

Even if, he now realized, he had completely neglected to call the League and notify them of a dangerous situation. So none of them knew where he was, to come to his rescue, or even that he was in trouble. They might not figure it out until late in the week, when he didn't show up for the League meeting.

He still had his wits, though. Maybe he could trick the possum into taking the collar off. If he pretended to be choking, or something. Not right away, but...later, when his guard was down. His tail drooped further. Lame dialogue, lame escape plans. What kind of superhero was he?

"Let's start with a blood sample. I've been waiting for that. Fortunately, you won't have to. Ha ha ha."

His laughter sounded forced, but he couldn't see how that would help him. He studied the possum for any sign of weakness, but without powers and with his hands and feet bound, he wasn't sure what he could do.

The possum tapped his muzzle with one claw, staring up and down Jake's uniform. "Now how does this thing come off?" he wondered, and Jake kept quiet.

For all his supposed intelligence, it took Doctor Defiance a full minute to find the snaps down the right side of the chest of Jake's outfit. His delicate pink fingers pried apart the first one, then another and another. He exposed Jake's shoulder and upper chest, and seemed to be

staring for several moments to decide where to stick the syringe he held in his left paw.

The possum cleared his throat. "Okay. Now, this might hurt a bit." His dark eyes drifted up from Jake's chest to meet the coyote's eyes, and he blinked. "Not that I care!" He pulled loose several more snaps from the uniform and pushed the sleeve down Jake's arm, exposing his elbow and his stomach down to the top of his hip. Once again, the possum paused and stared.

"You go commando, huh?" he said finally.

Jake was very aware of the cool lab air on his privates. He said, "I was kind of in a hurry when I put the uniform on tonight."

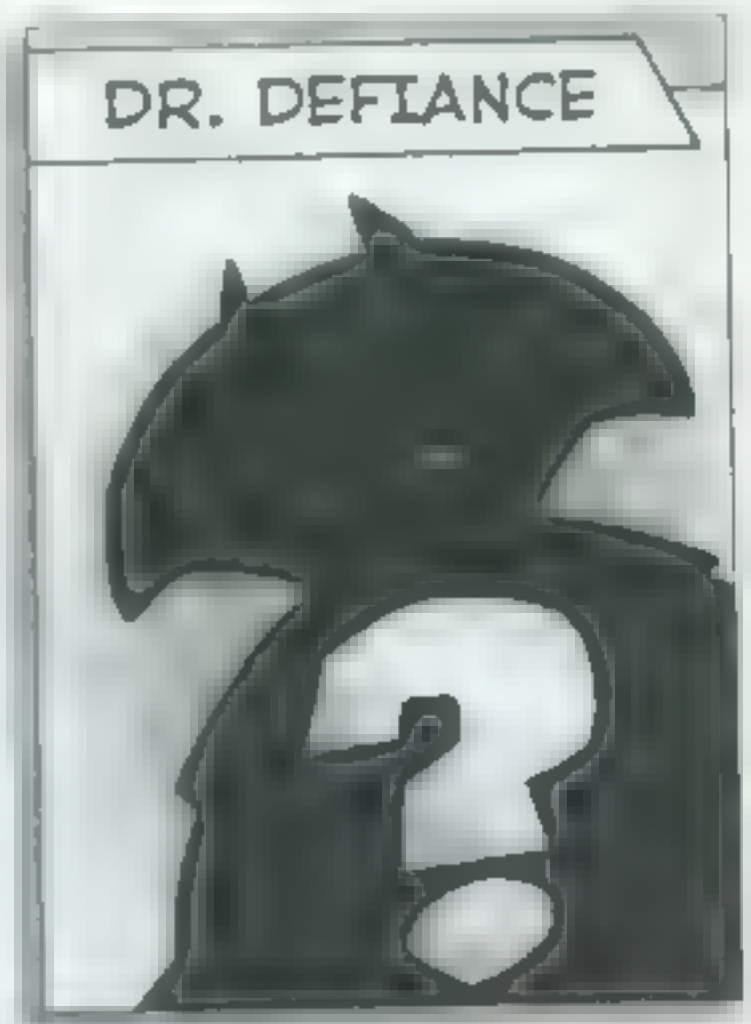
"Right, of course." Doctor Defiance put one of his delicate pink paws on Jake's chest. "You work out?"

"Not really." This looked like maybe a sign of weakness. Or something. Jake wasn't quite sure what was going on.

"You should. It's important to stay healthy."

"That's your job, now," Jake said bitterly.

The possum looked genuinely startled. "What?"



"To keep me healthy. As your prisoner?"

"Oh. Of course! Yes, I'll do all that." His paw was curling in Jake's chest fur, his muzzle close to the coyote's. Jake searched his eyes for any sign of trickery, but saw only reflected curiosity.

Then Doctor Defiance leaned in and kissed him on the mouth.

It lasted only for a couple seconds. The possum stepped back and gagged, but his muzzle is horrified. The syringe clattered to the floor.

Jake blinked, trying to figure out what was going on. "How long have you been a villain?" he said. "Because I think you need some more practice." Hey, he thought. That was pretty good.

"Oh my God," the possum moaned, "this isn't going well at all."

Damn, Jake thought. Maybe he's got a secret crush on me. Maybe that's the weakness I can use. I can take another kiss if it'll set me free. Actually, even if it won't... "Maybe you should've asked me first," he said.

"Asked you?" The possum straightened. "Doctor Destiny does not ask!"

"Doctor what?"

"Defiance." The possum's shoulders sagged. "What did I say?"

"Destiny." Jake couldn't help but grin. If this guy didn't have him prisoner, he'd be kind of cute, actually.

"Well, uh, would you mind if I kissed you again?"

Jake knew he was going to say "no," but what surprised him when he did say it was the swell going in his chest. And when the possum stepped truthfully up and licked his lips again, Jake felt himself getting very hard, very fast. Good job, body, he told himself unconvincingly. Way to, uh, pretend that I'm aroused...interested...and then he stopped telling himself anything, because his long tongue was being rubbed by a shorter, thicker one and his uniform's snaps

were coming undone one by one under a set of gentle fingers.

He felt those same fingers brush down his stomach and touch his fully hard erect one, a moaning as they curled around it and squeezed its hardness. "Mmm," Doctor Defiance said, pulling back from the kiss. "God, you're gorgeous."

Jake swallowed. "It's not really fair," he said, "I can't undress you."

"Oh, right." Smiling nervously, the possum stepped back and stepped out of his coat. Then he pulled off his shirt and slid his pants down.

Jake stared. "Oh, my God. Are you okay?"

Doctor Defiance reached down and brushed a finger along his half-erect member, purplish blue and split into two forks, each with its own glans and slit. "Yeah, all possums are like this. You never saw one before?" Jake shook his head. "I got teased a lot in gym class."

He

The possum came back up close to him, sliding his fingers under Jake's sac and then holding his shaft again. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Yeah." In a way he couldn't explain, it felt better than with the self-assured rabbit, where every sexual encounter provided her with a chance to teach him something or show him the right way to do things. He appreciated her expertise, but there was something about the shy, hesitant possum that made Jake feel like they were doing things together together. He's got a lot of up there practices. (Said and then shrieked) rather than him being led through every experience.

The possum leaned up to kiss him again, and he kissed back, and both of them nearly got the tips of their tongues bitten off a moment later when a shrill female voice echoed through the room.

"What the hell is going on?"

Jake snapped his head around as the possum flinched, then dove for his lab coat. Marcia

walked towards the possum, a gun held loosely in her right paw. "Charles?" Her tone carried that sharp warning that Jake knew meant trouble. Usually it was enough to send him blinking home.

"How did you get free?" Jake asked, trying to distract her, but she held up a stubby paw to him.

"Charles, maybe you didn't understand your role in all of this. You were supposed to be Doctor Deliance's leading supervillain. You have captured Blink Coyote and are beginning to perform experiments on him." She eyed the lab coat he was hastily buttoning shut. "Of a *medical* nature."

"Marcia..." Jake started, and this time succeeded in distracting her.

"And you!" She whirled, pointing the gun at him. "I set up this whole scenario, and it was not cheap, let me tell you, all to give you a nemesis and an adventure for your birthday, and I walk in to rescue you and find you kissing your nemesis?"

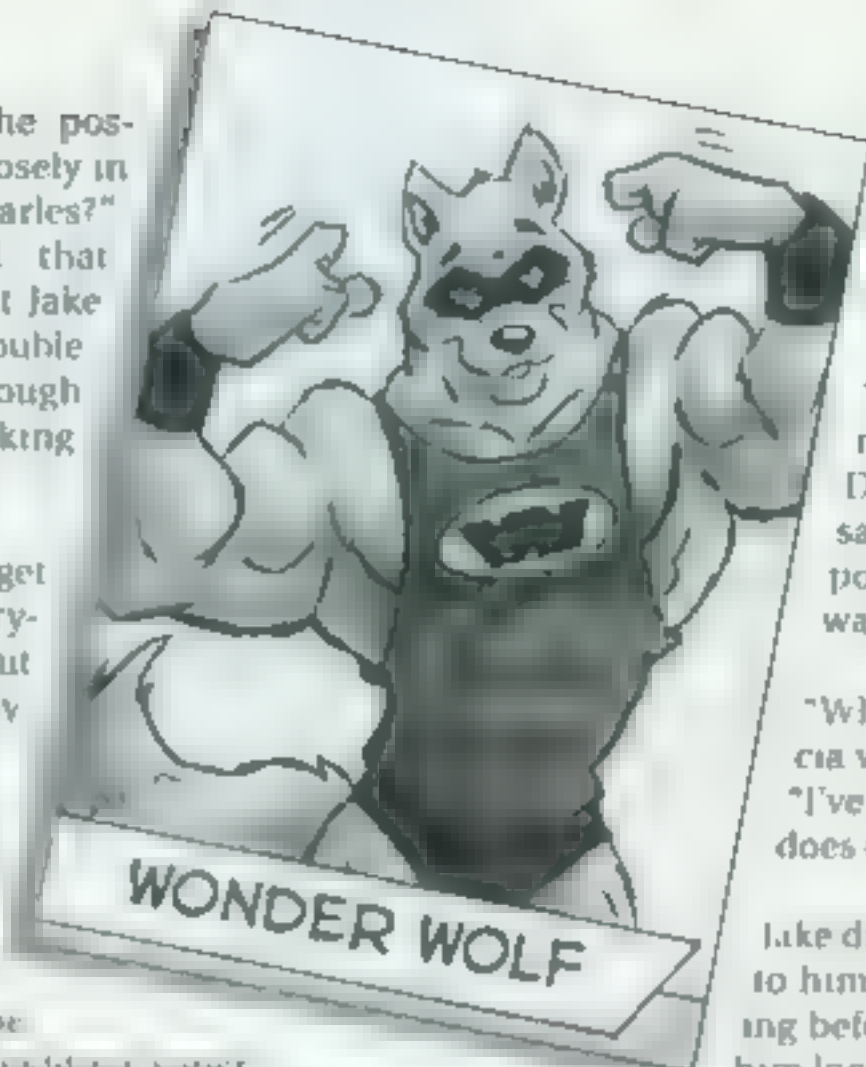
"Rescue me," Jake said, just as the possum said, "Nemesis."

"And," she said, pointedly looking down to where his shaft still hung hard and full over the flaps of his suit, "you're *into* it. Does your little feathered friend know about that secret romantic side?"

While Jake sputtered to reply, she turned on the possum again. "What were you thinking?"

"That you don't know how lucky you are. My God! He's gorgeous! Look at that body!"

They both turned to look at Jake, who squirmed under the scrutiny. "Hey, uh,



Marcia ignored him. "If I'd known you cruised that side of the street, I never would have hired you."

"I, uh, don't really go out of my way to keep it secret," Doctor Deliance—Charles—said. "I mean, did you see the poster of WonderWolf on the wall of my office?"

"What does that prove?" Marcia waved the gun dismissively. "I've got that same poster. So does everyone."

Jake didn't want to draw attention to himself again, but he was talking before he knew it. "The one of him looking over his shoulder from behind where he's naked?"

"He's not naked," Marcia said pointedly, looking down at Jake's crotch, which appeared to be enjoying the attention and begging for more. "He's got a speedo on."

"It's a butt shot," Charles said. "The speedo doesn't cover anything."

"That's what I say!" Jake said.

"Great butt," Charles said, and inclined his head as though he were trying to see Jake's. "Yours is too."

"All right," Marcia snapped, "enough. Come on, Jake." She reached up to his neck and unbuckled the collar. "Go on home. I'll be there soon. Though I don't really feel like celebrating anymore."

She left his uniform unbuttoned. The possum noticed, and reached out quickly to pull the flap up. "Hey!" the rabbit said as he pressed one of the snaps together, restoring some modesty to the bound coyote. "Paws off!"

He looked at the gun and then looked at her over his glasses. "It's not loaded."

"I don't care! Get away from him!" Her voice echoed shrilly through the lab.

The possum raised his paws and stepped back. "Okay, okay."

"And you're wrong," she snapped. "I know exactly how lucky I am. Come on, Jake. Let's go."

He was almost afraid to try blinking, because the feeling when it hadn't worked had been so terrifying. He looked at the space just behind Marcia, and just like that he was out of the restrictions and standing behind her. Before she could register his presence, he grabbed the collar out of her paw.

It was a black leather strap with small electronics embedded all around it. One light was on, burning green. Jake held it to his ear so he could hear the hum of the electronics, though it was faint. He held it over Marcia's head and he gave it back.

He dropped his paw to his side. "So," he said, "let me get this straight, because I know I'm not as smart as you. For my birthday, you paid some guy to create a device that takes away my power and then kidnap me?"

Marcia had dropped the gun to the floor, and now folded her arms. "I was doing it for us," she said. "I thought it could help with your... protect..."

Jake couldn't find any words to make light of that. He could only look down at the strap lying across his paw, and back up to the rabbit's brown and white face, now bearing a more placating expression. The change felt wrong, felt too fast to be sincere, and then he realized with a shock what he should have seen all along. She wasn't just good at putting away her hurt and guilt all those times they argued. She wasn't hurt at all, because she didn't care what he thought about her. She just wanted to keep him close and control him.

"It was supposed to be an adventure," she said. "Remember, sweetie? You wanted a nemesis, more excitement..."

"Go home," he said, interrupting her.

Her blue eyes narrowed. "I'm not leaving without you."

He closed his paw over the collar. "I said, go home, Marcia."

"Come with me."

Not only did he not want to go with her, he wasn't sure he wanted to see her again. The moment he let himself think that, he felt a huge wash of relief. To be able to live without being scrutinized, without being corrected, without being hemmed in, without having all his failings analyzed... "No. I don't think I want to see you again."

"You listen to me, Jake Kellin. You are not going to throw away everything we've worked for. All right, this evening didn't go quite the way I'd planned it, but that's no reason to...to..." He could see her trying to work up tears, but the build up was so obvious that when she squeezed one out of the corner of one eye, he was unmoved. "Please, Jake. I love you."

Jake shook his head. "No, you don't."

She wiped the tear away, and there were no more. Her eyes flashed now. "Fine. I won't beg any more. I'll be home, and if you're not there by midnight, then we are over." When the coyote didn't respond, she held out her paw. "Give me the collar."

"Oh ho ho," Jake said. "Not a chance."

"I paid for it!"

"You should take better care of your things," he said.

She lunged for it, and he tried to blink back without success. Damn thing, he thought as she grabbed the collar. He wrested it back from her without much trouble and pushed her back a foot. She glared at him.

"You do not want me as an enemy," she said.

"I don't want you at all," he said, which was a bit of a lie, but not much.

She glared for another few seconds, then turned on her heel and marched out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Jake let the reverberation from the slamming door die down before he exhaled and looked at the possum.

Charles stammered. "I...I was just doing what she paid me.

Jake smiled. "It's okay, I know." He held up the collar. "Mind if I break this?"

The possum hesitated, then shook his head. "She paid for it. It's not mine."

Jake walked over to the metal stools and dropped the collar to the floor, where he stood and stared down at it. "What's the point, though? You really built this in six months?" The possum nodded. "No offense, but I assume you're not the most brilliant scientist in the world. So there's got to be someone else who could do this if they wanted to. So what's the point?"

Charles cleared his throat. "Well, actually, I was sort of exaggerating. You know, I was trying to be in character. I did it in six months because your, uh, friend kept monitoring devices in her apartment and fed me months of data on your ability. Anyone without access to that much data would have a

much harder time replicating my results. So, uh, if you destroy that, then probably I'm the only one who could build another one. And you can have my notebooks if you want."

"Thanks." Jake brought the stool down on the collar over and over, until the delicate electronics were shattered. He picked up the leather strap and held it to his neck, then blinked across the room without any problem. "That's that," he said, and looked at the collar. "It's a nice leather," he said. "Maybe I'll wear it just to remind me."

"Of what?" The possum looked confused.

"Who to trust."

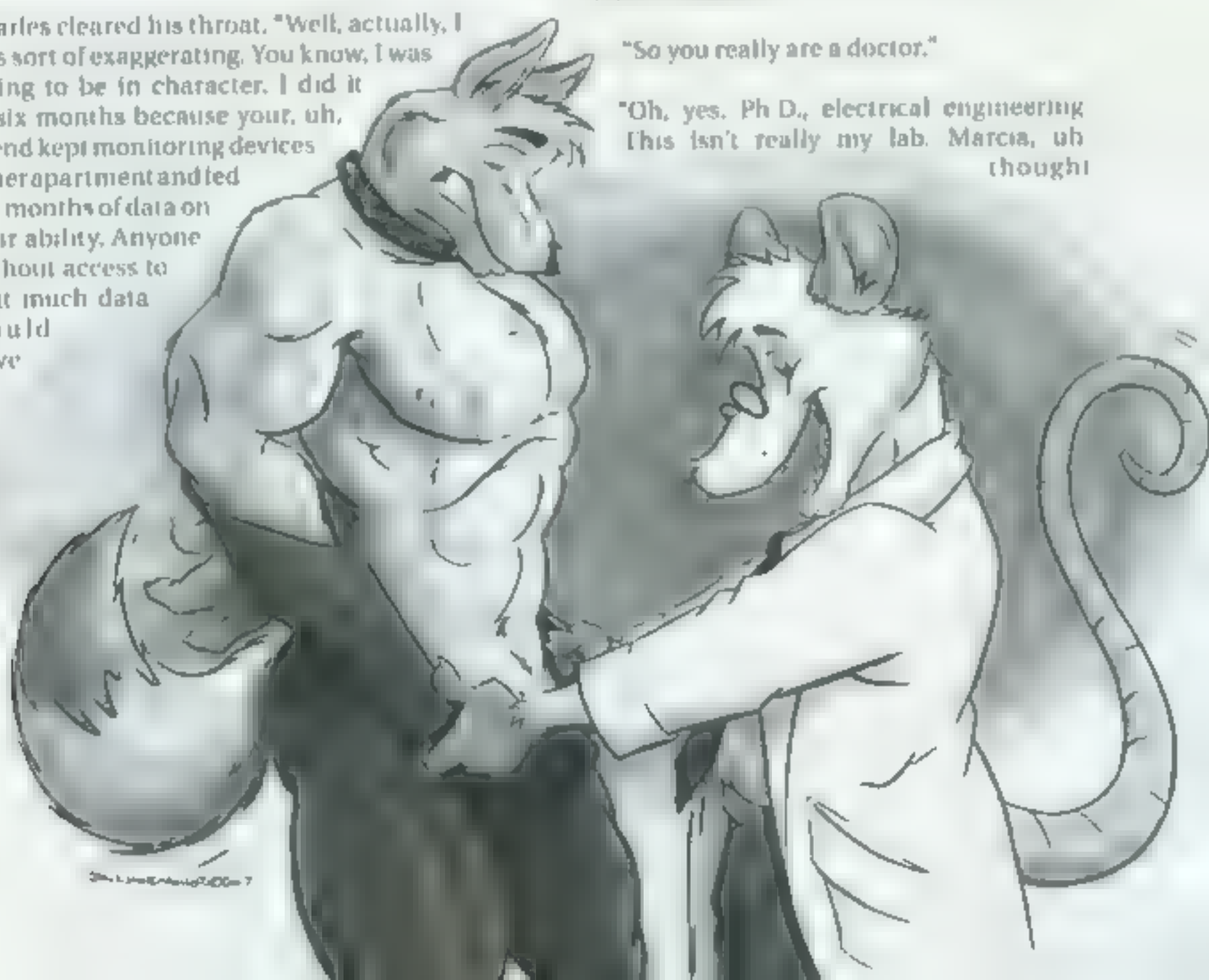
"Oh." Charles looked down and fidgeted. Jake waited until he looked up again, and saw the surprise come into his eyes. "You're still here."

"What's your name?"

"Charles," the possum said. "Goldstein. Dr. Charles Goldstein."

"So you really are a doctor."

"Oh, yes. Ph.D., electrical engineering. This isn't really my lab. Marcia, uh, thought I



it was more 'evil villain' than my office." He adjusted his glasses.

"Well, you know my secret identity now," Jake sighed

Charles blinked. "Oh, I swore I wouldn't reveal it. I mean, I swear I won't...you don't have to worry about that."

Jake smiled. "You know the weird thing? I trust you."

"Thanks," Charles looked away again

Jake studied him. The possum's tail was curled around his legs and he was fidgeting from side to side. He tried to work out how he felt, himself. Even though his body was still warm from their kiss, it seemed like a long time ago. It would be easy to push it away and forget about it

If he wanted to.

"So," Jake said after a moment, "since you're done working for Marcia, I guess you might have some time on your paws?"

"I do have a job at Mount Cedar," Charles said, then hurriedly added, "but yes, yes, I should. Um, why?"

"You'd be a pretty good gadgethead," Jake said. "I'd sure rather have you working with me than against me."

Now Charles let his muzzle slip into a small grin. "Is that a job offer?"

"I can't pay you," Jake said, "Marcia had all the money."

"Oh, I'd do it for free," Charles said

Jake smiled. "I was kind of thinking of making you part of the team, eventually."

"Like, your partner?" Charles squeaked, and then clapped a paw to his muzzle. "I mean, um, sidekick."

Jake laughed softly at the possum's stricken expression. "Let's say sidekick to start. But you

know...I can't believe this, but...I'd be willing to talk about terms, say, over dinner?"

Charles gaped at him. "After..."

"You couldn't tell I was enjoying it? Hell, it surprised me, too. I want to take it slow, but I'm interested enough to give it a shot. Even if it meant I would be the only guy in the League with a boyfriend."

"You wouldn't be the only gay one," Charles grinned when he saw Jake's eyes widen. "You didn't know about WonderWolf?"

"Really?"

"Well, he can't keep a steady boyfriend, but why do you think he does all those butt posters? It's advertising."

Jake giggled, and then his stomach rumbled. "How about that dinner? You might want to put some clothes on, though." He started to button up his uniform, then stopped. "And I should get out of this uniform."

Charles picked up his clothes. "I'll be here and dressed in five minutes."

"I'll be back," Jake paused, "You know, I'd much rather have a friend than a nemesis as a birthday present."

Charles glanced at the door. "I think you might have gotten both."

Jake's ears perked up. "Hey, yeah! You know, she was a lousy girlfriend, but I bet she'd be a great villain."

"Hopefully not too good."

"With you on my side, I'm not worried," Jake grinned, and impulsively blinked to right in front of Charles and kissed him on the nose. He answered the wide smile on the possum's face with one of his own, flicked his ears jauntily, and blinked.



VICIOUS VIXEN



OFFICER ROSEN



POWER O



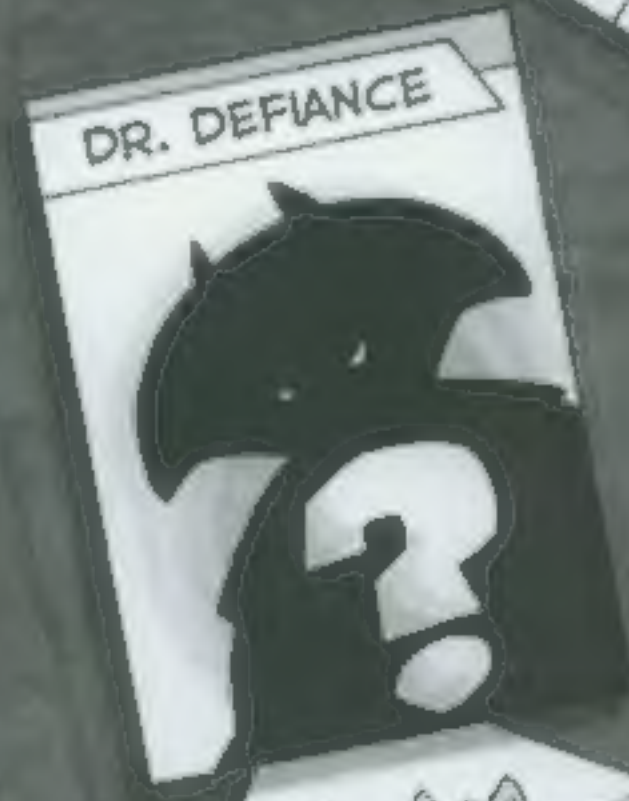
MRS. BLINK



CRYPTO FOX



BLINK COYOTE



DR. DEFIANCE



RED LIGHTNING



MOXY



WONDER WOLF

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Animal Magnetism

sleep y morning whine
tongue tease es goo down my shaft
pink skin hot & tight

gimme puppy love
caress my dirty squirrel
a wet ecstasy

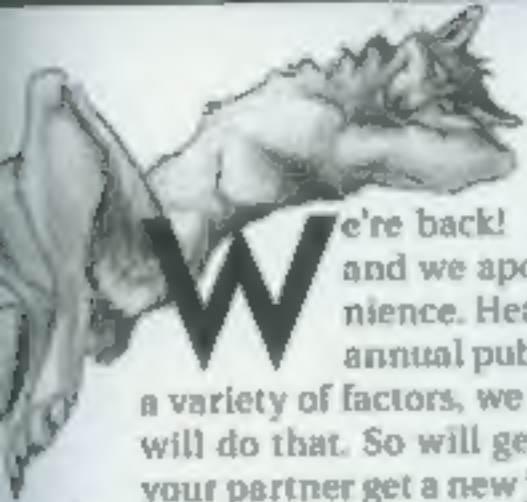
take it hard hungry for butt love
beg me to enter
beautiful pup

exquisite canine
shoot your juice in my bottom
I am your bitch boy

take me out to the dog park
satisfy my lust
to chase pretty tail s

I shudder ready
nuzzle gently at his paw
soft bark retrieve s bone

your love is a leash
teach ing me to be faithful
bound in your kennel



We're back! Thank you for waiting and we apologize for the inconvenience. Heat was intended to be an annual publication, but because of a variety of factors, we skipped a year. Moving will do that. So will getting a new job, having your partner get a new job, trying to finish grad school, raising a puppy (and then losing him in a legal dispute eight months later), and working full time.

This volume came together because of the help and patience of a couple of foxes who came to my aid. You see, after the normal one-year deadline had come and gone, I looked at my life and realized that if I were going to get the magazine out with *only* a year's delay I was going to need help. In the past, my associate editors were called upon to help primarily with the editing of the final copy, but this time around I needed considerably more help. So, Kevin and Tim stepped in to help with reviewing the submission slushpile and selecting those stories which we thought rounded out the issue. They also helped edit the stories, select artists to accompany the them, and wrangle said artists to get their submissions in (mostly) on time. The volume you hold in your hands would not exist without their help, and I'm very appreciative of it!

We hope that you enjoyed your journey through the tales in this volume. The ports of call

were varied and spread throughout time as well as space. As always, we tried to provide a little something for everyone, and to a large part we succeeded. We still need more submissions from women who prefer women, however! I'm sure they're out there. Please spread the word among all the writers you know who aren't afraid to tackle topics erotic and exotic that we're happy to take submissions covering pretty much any combination of the sexes possible. With luck, we should be back on track to release Heat #5 in July of 2008, so anyone wishing to submit for this issue should get their stories to us by early fall of 2007.

And to our readers, please feel free to submit your reviews of Heat to our website! I'm sure one or two of you have an opinion about this magazine. Praise is always welcome...as is constructive criticism. For Heat we're rather deficient in both, compared to the other things Sofawolf has published, so please let us know what you think. This magazine sells well, and we would love to hear why.

Aside from the obvious...

HEAT

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